

MUSIC AT THE CLOSE

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MUSIC AT THE CLOSE *Edward A. McCourt*

JUDGMENT GLEN *Will R. Bird*

Music at the Close

EDWARD A. McCOURT



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All characters in this book are entirely fictitious, and any resemblance to any living person is purely coincidental.

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To
MY FATHER AND MOTHER



BOOK ONE

Summer Sun

—boyhood is a summer sun.

—POE.



Chapter One

THE BOY stirred uneasily on the seat of the democrat and looked up at the face of the man beside him. "Is it much farther, Uncle Matt?"

"'Bout four miles. Gettin' tired?"

"Not very. It's a long way, isn't it?"

"Quite a ways. All of thirty mile, we figger. But that really ain't so much in this country. Back east it's different." The man picked up a black-snake whip which lay coiled under the seat and cracked it expertly. The tired, sweat-stained horses broke into a long, ground-consuming trot over the deeply rutted trail that wound in and out among groves of stunted poplar and willow. There were many sloughs along the way—small bodies of shallow, stagnant water bordered by growths of rank grass. Some of the sloughs had already dried up, leaving only a white alkali deposit to mark their beds. Sometimes the trail cut straight across the dry beds, and the alkali rose from under the wheels of the democrat in fine grey particles that stung the skin and tasted like saltpetre on the tongue.

It was a hot June afternoon and the heat waves rose in shimmering lines above the level of the land. The boy wore a heavy dark jacket and grey knickerbockers buckled at the knees over black woollen stockings. He was very warm, but because his blue shirt was dirty and travel-stained he was ashamed to remove his jacket. From time to time he looked enviously at his uncle who wore faded denim overalls and a shirt without collar. Once he took off his tweed cap and held it on his knees. It was pleasant to feel the breeze ruffling his hair and drying the sweat from his temples. But the sun was hot on the back of his head, and soon he replaced the cap and resigned himself to discomfort. He had often read about people getting sunstroke on the desert and dying in agony shortly afterwards, and he did not like to take any chances.

The country through which they were passing was not true prairie, such as the boy had seen from the window of the train the day before. Here was no vast expanse of treeless plain stretching into remote purple distances, but a gently rolling terrain dotted with innumerable groves of willow and poplar—"bluffs" Uncle Matt called them. Straight ahead the uplands broke into a range of low, softly rounded hills. On the slopes of the hills brown patches were showing, but on the level the grass was long and thick. Far off, the countryside looked a monotonous green; closer at hand the monotony was broken by the bright hues of clustered prairie flowers—the soft yellow of the buffalo bean, the pink and white of sun-bleached roses, the gaudy orange and red of the tiger-lily. But the boy had long since lost interest in a scene which over a stretch of twenty-five miles had shown only slight local variation. He had been riding along the winding trail in the heat of the summer sun since early afternoon and he was tired and depressed. Suddenly he felt a strong impulse to cry and quickly turned his head away, pretending interest in a flock of prairie-chicken that had exploded into flight from beneath the horses' feet.

His uncle noticed the boy's distress. "Don't take on, Neil," he said awkwardly. "Figger I know how you feel. You'll like the farm once you get used to it. Got a colt you can have to break in and ride. If the crop's good I'll mebbe get you a saddle in the fall."

The boy kept his head averted. "It's just that it's sort of lonesome around here," he said.

Uncle Matt nodded in a troubled sort of way. He was not a man to whom words came easily under any circumstances, and the boy beside him was a stranger. Ever since leaving town, Uncle Matt had been hard put to it to find topics of conversation, and the boy had not helped him by asking questions. For the past hour they had sat side by side in almost complete silence.

The trail, which had been rising gradually for several miles as it approached the range of hills, made a sudden turn and began to wind up a long slope. Uncle Matt was stirred to unexpected animation. "We can see the home place from the top—just about a mile down the other side. See the river, too, way up at the bend."

The word river stirred something in Neil's blood. All the way from the bleak little prairie town he had been looking, much of the time instinctively rather than consciously, for water. The shallow stagnant sloughs, most of them weed-infested and covered with a thick green scum, did not count. Once or twice the trail had dipped unexpectedly down the steep sides of coulées carved out by the rush of water in springtime, but the early torrents had subsided to sluggish trickles moving almost imperceptibly over muddy beds. Back home there had been streams everywhere, and a river winding through the very heart of the village where Neil had gone to school. And because the word river suggested something of the world he had left behind, the boy's eyes were shining with expectation when at length the democrat reached the top of the long ascent and Uncle Matt drew rein to give the horses a breathing spell.

"There she is!" said Uncle Matt proudly. "When I homesteaded here fifteen years ago—we come out in the spring of '03—there wasn't an acre turned in the whole country—and look at her now!"

From the top of the hill one could see for miles in every direction. Straight ahead the ground fell away in a long, rolling slope thickly dotted with poplar bluffs and seamed with steeply banked dry coulées. The occasional strips of cultivated land introduced an incongruous note of symmetry into the irregular lines of the landscape. Farm buildings, dwarfed by the immensity of natural features surrounding them, were clustered in little groups at widely spaced intervals. But Neil was not interested in the scene lying directly below him. He was staring off to the north-west, where he could see water sliding past between enormous, tree-covered banks that rose up steeply almost from the water's edge. But there was no tinge of blue or green in the water that ran between the banks. Even in the light of the afternoon sun there was a curiously sinister quality about the turgid stream that held Neil's attention, almost against his will.

Uncle Matt followed the direction of the boy's eyes. "The old Saskatchewan's a mighty big river," he said. "Ain't got nothin' like her in Ontario."

Neil shivered. "It's awful black, isn't it?"

"Black lookin' and black-hearted. It's a good river to stay away from."

He cracked the whip again, and they rattled down the hill towards a group of squat, weather-beaten buildings that stood about a mile farther on, at the end of a long green strip of cultivated land. "Got a half-section now—that's three hundred and twenty acres," said Uncle Matt. "Homestead and a quarter I bought off of the C.P.R. Twenty years to pay. I got fifty acres broke on the C.P.R. last year. Should go forty to the acre if she don't freeze. I got the crop in early but the land's pretty low."

A light had crept into Uncle Matt's faded blue eyes and he made unexpected incongruous gestures with his hands. The boy, accustomed to the old man's taciturnity, looked at him in surprise. "Not like your farms back east," continued Uncle Matt. "Out here you got room to move round in—all kinds of it." He waved a hand in the air, then as if ashamed of his exuberance, dropped it on his knee. "Yes, sir," he added presently, "she's a great country—when you get a crop."

When he spoke again there was a diffident note in his voice. "Ain't had much luck the last couple of years, though—frost and drought. But the cattle pulled us through. Got nigh onto forty head. There's lots of free range around here and the grass is always pretty good. The Rheinharts and the Schultzes and that crowd are beginnin' to talk herd law, but we figger we can vote 'em down in July."

A wagon drawn by a team of heavy bays rattled around the poplar bluff ahead. Uncle Matt pulled his team out of the trail, leaving one rutted track clear for the approaching wagon. The two vehicles drew abreast and stopped. "Howdy, Matt," said the man in the wagon.

"Afternoon, Mr. Hunter," said Uncle Matt. The formal salutation was a tribute of respect due the district patriarch. Old Man Hunter was nearly eighty; his long white beard and fringe of hair were snow white, but his eyes were a clear and frosty blue. He sat on the spring seat of the wagon at an imposing height from the ground and stared down at Neil with undisguised curiosity.

"I figger the little chap's the orphan you been expectin'," he said.

Uncle Matt nodded. "Em's niece's youngster. He's pretty tired."

Old Man Hunter spat a stream of tobacco juice over the side of the wagon-box, and wiped his mouth with his coat sleeve. "Any noos from town?"

"Nothin' much. Seems like they got the Germans—stopped all right. But Lloyd Peers has been killed. Word just come through this mornin'. Don't know as his people have heard yet."

"That so? Too bad." Old Man Hunter spat again and gathered up the reins. "Matt, if them Huns can just hang on for about two more years we'll all be able to retire. Two years—that's all I ask."

He clucked at the horses and the wagon lurched forward. But Uncle Matt did not immediately drive on. He sat back on the seat of the democrat, feet braced against the dash-board, staring straight ahead. "The old man shouldn't talk that way," he said at last. "And him just about eighty. He's right, though. Two more years—"

An expression of something like shame crossed his thin, sensitive face and he sat up and shouted loudly at the horses. "Too many young men has been killed already," he said. "It's gone on long enough."

The trail ran straight alongside a barbed wire fence. On the other side of the fence lay Uncle Matt's field of wheat. In a few minutes the horses swung off the main trail and stopped before a wire gate. "Hop down and open her, Neil," said Uncle Matt. "Give you a chance to stretch your legs. We're just about home."

Neil climbed stiffly down from the high seat of the democrat. His outstretched foot missed the iron step and he fell sprawling to the ground. Again barely resisting the impulse to cry, he got to his feet, brushed the dust off his knees and started towards the gate. Then he stopped short. A horseman was coming along the trail; he was riding fast and his big bay horse was flecked with sweat. He wore a wide-brimmed Stetson, a flaming scarlet coat, and dark trousers with a wide yellow band down

the legs. Neil looked at the rider in astonishment and delight. "Gosh—a policeman! A real Mountie!"

The rider galloped by in a swirl of dust. He did not turn his head as he went past. Uncle Matt grunted. "Figger he's lookin' for moonshiners. Lots of home brew bein' turned out in these parts."

"Is there much shooting?" Neil asked, wide-eyed.

"Not much." There was a dry note in Uncle Matt's voice. "Young Latimer takes a pot at a gopher every so often to keep his hand in, but that's about all. We're a law-abidin' people, although we do turn out a little moonshine. I figger Latimer wouldn't mind pluggin' somebody though. He's got a mean look."

The trail cut straight across the pasture and into a big grove of poplars. Once, through an opening in the trees, Neil caught a glimpse of the small frame house that was henceforth to be his home and a queer tight feeling came into his stomach and he wanted to be sick. He shut his eyes and did not open them again until the democrat had come to a stop. Uncle Matt had pulled up in front of a wooden watering-trough and the horses were drinking noisily, with the bridle bits still in their mouths. Near the well stood the barn, a long, low ramshackle building with a peak roof that sagged in the middle. Neil heard loud squeals coming from the lean-to which ran along one side of the barn. "Fifteen hogs in there just about ready for shippin'," Uncle Matt explained. "Good thing you'll be here to help me load 'em."

They drove past the barn and through an open gate up to the house. The outside of the house was drab and weather-beaten, and the paint was peeling off in large flakes. But there were white curtains at the windows; and a few potted geraniums added a splash of gay colour. A big brown and white dog of indeterminate breed lay stretched out on the wooden steps that led up to the kitchen door. When the democrat came to a stop he got to his feet and wagged his long tail slowly back and forth in a greeting that was more conventional than enthusiastic.

"Home, Neil," said Uncle Matt.

Neil got down from the seat and stood beside the democrat. There was a sudden look of fear in his eyes. For the past four

days he had been buoyed up by the excitement of the journey, and the sense of escape from the routine of living which travel, for the time of its duration, always affords. But the adventure was over and a new life beginning. And Neil's heart was filled with the vague terrors that assail one compelled to leave the familiar for the unsought and unknown.

He stood quietly beside the democrat while Uncle Matt lifted down the two suitcases which held all his possessions. The dog looked at him with indifference, then trotted down the wooden steps and joined Uncle Matt at the back of the democrat. Neil turned quickly. "I'll carry a case."

Uncle Matt shook his head. "Too heavy, Neil," he said. "I can manage." Then, in a rare flash of intuition, "All right, catch hold. I guess you're huskier than you look."

Uncle Matt went up the steps, Neil close at his heels. Now that some of his attention was concentrated on the suitcase the boy was able to blink back his tears; and the lump in his throat was no longer choking him. Uncle Matt opened the screen door and lifted his voice in a shout. "Hey, Em, where are you?"

From somewhere beyond the kitchen came the sound of heavy clumping footsteps, and a door flung open. "Well, for the land sakes! I was in the bedroom puttin' away the ironin' and I didn't hear a sound and Laddie never opened his mouth. That dog's gettin' too lazy to bark!"

Aunt Em was a big woman with a sharp, pinched face and sparse grey hair drawn tightly back from her forehead and screwed in a knot on top. But her pale protruding eyes were friendly when she looked down at the forlorn figure before her. "So you're Neil Fraser," she said. "I declare you're the spittin' image of your mother!"

She kissed him with some warmth. "Your suppers are in the oven waitin' for you. I suppose you're both starvin'. I didn't wait on account of the milkin' to be done and no tellin' when you'd be home. Neil, the wash-basin's over there in the corner and you'll find soft water in the rain-barrel outside. You needn't help your uncle with the horses tonight."

Neil washed himself with unusual care, emptied the water into the big slop-pail under the wash-stand, and combed his

hair in the fly-specked mirror that hung on the wall just above the basin. Then he sat down quietly on a straight-backed, rickety kitchen chair and looked about him—furtively at first, because his mother had often told him that it was rude to stare and he did not want to make a bad impression on Aunt Em. She was his great-aunt really, and the very remoteness of the connection made her the more formidable in his sight.

The kitchen was large, but the two narrow windows in opposite walls admitted little light, so that no matter how brightly the sun shone, there was always the impression of dusk within. At one end stood a massive iron range, covered with smoke-stained pans and kettles. It gave out a strong, steady volume of heat into a room that even without a fire would have been too warm on a June evening, for the ceiling was barely higher than a tall man's head, and the walls were without insulation. The floor was covered with patched linoleum from which all semblance of pattern had long since disappeared. A cream separator stood in one corner, the wash-stand and basin in another. A large oilcloth-covered table occupied most of the floor space in the centre of the kitchen. There were three or four chairs around it—much mended with glue and wire, shiny with varnish that had run and dried in lumps and ridges. Shelves built into one corner accommodated stacks of heavy earthenware dishes, a few imitation cut-glass bowls, and several jugs with garish landscapes painted on their fat sides. Brightly coloured calendars, many of them years old, were ranged at regular intervals around the smoke-grimed walls. A framed picture of a Victorian goldilocks giving a reluctant white kitten a bath was hung above a small work-table near one of the windows. The glass over the picture was cracked, and a small piece had fallen out of one corner.

While she dished up the supper, Aunt Em talked steadily. Neil answered her innumerable questions with polite monosyllables. He would have liked to ask some questions himself, about where he was to sleep and how soon he would have to start school and whether he could see the saddle pony that night. But he was afraid to interrupt Aunt Em, and she did not pause long enough to give him time to formulate his questions. For years now Aunt Em had been combatting the

terrifying loneliness of her environment by carrying on audible conversations with herself, and the presence of a twelve-year-old boy sitting quietly on a chair by the window did not disturb a habit so deeply ingrained, but served to give her conversation direction and purpose.

Neil was puzzled by her avid curiosity about things that did not matter, like the meals he had eaten on the train and what it was like in an upper berth and how many people there were in a coach and whether they were friendly. When Uncle Matt came in from the barn she plied him with questions about the trip to town, and listened to his short, mumbled replies with an intensity of concentration that Neil found incomprehensible.

Aunt Em had finished the chores, and there was nothing for Uncle Matt to do after supper except smoke a pipe and go to bed. But the old man bolted his meal in silent haste. A habit of years could not be suspended because for the moment it had no purpose. Aunt Em sat at the head of the table and passed platters of salt pork and vegetables from which Uncle Matt and Neil helped themselves. Neil had little appetite for the strong, greasy food, but it was easier to choke down a plateful than to explain to Aunt Em how he felt. For dessert there were great hunks of pie made from preserved Saskatoon berries and washed down with cups of strong hot tea.

"Now, Neil," said Aunt Em, when the boy had forced the last mouthful of pie down his throat, "you must be dead tired. Your uncle will show you where the backhouse is, and then I'll take you upstairs."

"Upstairs" was a musty-smelling attic room reached by a steep ladder, which had been hastily put into shape for human occupancy after years of use as store-room and catch-all. There was a small window at each end, and the naked two-by-fours supporting the roof had been crudely covered over with flimsy beaver-board. The furniture in the room was of the scantiest—a small camp bed, a home-made chest of drawers, and a chair with one leg an inch or two shorter than the others. "We ain't got the room all fixed up yet," Aunt Em explained, "but it'll be real snug and pretty when we get it done over with calomine. Now you hop right into bed and have a good sleep. Tomorrow

mornin' you can sleep in. Monday you'll start school. Then you'll meet lots of nice children your own age."

She went off downstairs and left Neil to undress in the semi-darkness. He slipped off his clothes and piled them neatly on the chair. Then he pulled on his nightshirt, mumbled his prayers at the bedside, and crept in between rough sheets. There was a heavy quilt on the bed and he was much too warm, but he was afraid to throw the quilt off for fear his aunt might be annoyed.

In a few minutes Aunt Em reappeared, breathing heavily, for the ladder was steep. "All right now?" she asked. "Not too warm?"

"A little bit," said Neil.

Aunt Em folded the quilt and laid it at the foot of the bed.

"Always cools off at night in this country," she said. "You can pull the quilt up if you feel the need of it."

She bent over and kissed him, this time perfunctorily. Already the boy had become a part of the household, to be accepted without fuss into the daily scheme of things. Then she went away and Neil was left alone.

He lay awake for a long time. The windows of the attic room were set close to the floor and from where he lay he could look out of the window in the gable end by the foot of his bed. He watched the sky change from light blue to indigo, saw the stars come out one by one, then in multitudes and blaze with astonishing vividness and splendour. Presently he threw aside the thin sheet that covered him and stepped out of bed. He hesitated a moment, then knelt down by the window, pressed his nose against the pane and looked out.

But the immensity of darkness appalled him. He shrank back, then by a deliberate, sustained effort of will forced himself again to the window. Suddenly there came upon his ears a long-drawn-out, eerie cry that seemed to echo to the near-by stars. The cry was answered from some remote spot, and soon the night was alive with quivering sound. Neil had never heard the lonely, haunting wail of the coyote before, and he felt cold as ice all over. He fled back to bed and drew the sheet close about him. He said his prayers again twice over, and tried hard to make himself believe that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

were really watching over him to guard him from all harm. But Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were at best strangers, kindly strangers, no doubt, but remote from the realities of the present moment. Neil wanted his mother, not the angels of God. He tried to imagine her by the side of his bed, speaking softly to him, tucking in the sheet, perhaps, and telling him to sleep soundly. But his imagination was not strong enough to triumph over the reality. His mother did not come, would never come again. When he finally fell asleep his eyes were red and swollen and his pillow wet with tears.

Chapter Two

THE PINE CREEK schoolhouse stood on the edge of a steeply banked coulée through which, in springtime, Pine Creek flowed tumultuously to the river. But by June the creek had dried up, except for a few muddy-bottomed holes that appeared at intervals along the coulée bed. The sides of the coulée were covered with a heavy growth of willow and poplar, interspersed with an occasional stunted birch. Why the stream had been called Pine Creek no one knew; there were no pines anywhere along its banks except at the very mouth where it joined the Saskatchewan. But the name served its function; it was a label and a postal address, and no one ever thought of questioning its appropriateness.

On Monday morning Neil Fraser started reluctantly for the Pine Creek school. He was afraid to intrude into a school community in the middle of term. He himself had often witnessed the introduction of a new boy under similar conditions, and had joined with his fellows in unmercifully tormenting the stranger. It did not occur to him to hope that he might be spared what he had come to regard as the operation of a natural law; he would have been as likely to doubt the rising of the sun or the coming on of darkness. He hoped only that he would acquit himself well; but as he had never been a "new boy" before, he could not found his hope on experience. He shuffled slowly along a dusty cow-path across a wide stretch of free range, wishing that it was Tuesday. On Tuesday he would be part of the community. But today was Monday, and with fear in his heart he faced the unknown.

By the time he reached the school, most of the pupils had already assembled and were playing noisily in the yard. They stared at him with uninhibited curiosity. He ventured a timid hallo and slipped inside the shabby little green and white school-

house. It was dark and cool indoors and there was a pleasant smell of fresh paint in the air. Neil placed the syrup tin containing his lunch on the shelf in the cloak-room beside half-a-dozen similar tins. He spent as much time as possible arranging the tin so that it was in a straight line with all the others. He did not want to go inside and show himself to the teacher, because Aunt Em had said that Miss Piggott was a holy terror, and he did not want to return to the yard. Not just yet, anyway. Not until he had had a chance to size up his future companions at close range and under conditions involving no risk.

The door leading to the porch swung open and a boy about Neil's age appeared. Neil smiled conciliatingly. "Hallo," he said.

The boy in the doorway was dark-skinned and black-eyed. He was dressed in faded shirt and overalls and his feet were bare. "I guess you're the orphan that's come to live with the Jardines. What's your name?"

"Neil. Neil Fraser."

"I'm Gil Reardon."

Neil nodded and backed away. Aunt Em had told him something about each of the pupils. She had especially warned him against "gettin' in" with Gil Reardon. "The Reardons is black Irish and a bad lot," she had said. "Don't you have no more to do with that Gil than you have to. He'll lead you into more trouble than all the other kids put together."

Neil, with his back to the shelf where the lunch pails stood, tried hard to stare Gil down and wished that the bell would ring or that the teacher would come out to the cloak-room. Gil returned his stare, but his manner was speculative rather than defiant. "You've got a pretty good build," he said at last. "I figger you and me's about the same size."

"Figger so," said Neil.

Gil pulled up the sleeve of his khaki shirt. "Feel," he commanded.

Neil felt the exposed bicep. "Hard, all right," he said. He did not offer to expose his own muscles, although Gil Reardon obviously expected him to.

They stared at each other in silence. But the speculative look had gone from Gil's eyes, and he seemed to have made up his

mind about something. "Just about the same size," he repeated. "How old?"

The door leading from the cloak-room to the schoolroom proper opened and Miss Piggott appeared. "Here, Gil," she said, "go ring the bell."

Gil took the bell and went outside, Neil at his heels. When the children filed past, he fell in at the tail of the straggling procession and followed into the schoolroom. At a word from Miss Piggott he took his place beside a vacant desk. Then he joined with the rest of the school in repeating the Lord's Prayer, and the day's work began.

While Miss Piggott was assigning work to the various classes, Neil had opportunity to look about him. The schoolroom was small, the softwood floor stained and splintered, the walls bright with samples of art work more distinguished for violence of colour than evidence of artistic talent. Two blackboards took up all of the back wall. An organ, aged and asthmatic, stood in one corner. A large bookcase filled the opposite corner, books showing in orderly rows behind the glass doors.

Miss Piggott was a tired, pinched virgin of uncertain age. She had grown up in a small Maritimes community where the stigma of old maid inexorably attached itself to every female over the age of thirty. When she was twenty-nine Miss Piggott migrated west where, according to popular legend, men outnumbered women ten to one. But she had failed to land any one of the ten allotted her by popular statistics, and had long since given up trying. Soured by perpetual disappointment, she compensated for her frustrations by ruling her little flock with an iron hand. Even Gil Reardon paid attention when Miss Piggott spoke.

Neil listened closely whenever Miss Piggott called any of the pupils by name, and tried to remember the detailed descriptions which Aunt Em had given him of his future classmates. Before first recess time he was satisfied that he had identified nearly everyone in the room. The three tow-headed little shavers, two boys and a girl, in Grades Three, Four and Five respectively, were certainly the Svensons, offspring of a Swedish couple who homesteaded three miles east of the Jardines; the tall thin girl with the serious, freckled face was Minnie Whittaker, senior

pupil in the school and daughter of an English couple just avoiding starvation on a farm adjoining the Svensons. The others, a round dozen or more, belonged mostly to the tribes of Rheinharts and Schultzes, hustling Pennsylvania Dutch, whose prosperous farms lay due south about four miles. They drove to school every morning, bulging over the sides of a dilapidated democrat. Aunt Em said that the Rheinharts and the Schultzes were "clannish;" some people accused them of pro-German sympathies, and pointed out that although the two families numbered at least half-a-dozen young, unattached men in their ranks, no Rheinhart or Schultz had enlisted, and all had proved adept in dodging the draft. At school, the youngsters formed a closely knit unit; they fought fiercely among themselves, but towards the other pupils presented a united and formidable front.

The morning passed without incident. Neil was placed tentatively in Grade Seven, along with Gil Reardon and the Schultz twins, Elsie and Velora. Miss Piggott found some school-books, the unwitting legacy of a former pupil, in the book-cases, and Neil was soon involved in the rules of grammar and the intricacies of fractions. At recess, to his astonishment, he was accepted without comment as one of the group. His school-mates seemed anxious to introduce him at once into their games and he played Prisoner's Base with noisy enthusiasm. After recess Miss Piggott commended his work and assured him that he would remain in Grade Seven. Gil Reardon grinned at him from across the aisle and Neil's heart glowed with happiness.

But when the noon hour came, a curious, half-hysterical excitement seemed to creep through the school. Lunches were hastily bolted, to the accompaniment of much giggling and chatter that Neil found incomprehensible and sinister. Gil Reardon did not join in the clamour. He sat a little apart from the others, eating with grave deliberation. From time to time he looked at Neil; the expression in his eyes was detached and dispassionate.

Lunch over and tin pails restored to their shelf, the pupils as if in response to a universal impulse moved in a body down the steep hill to the flats beside the creek. Neil no longer had any doubt of what was in store for him. His first inclination,

when he had forced himself to accept the truth, was to break away from the group and seek safety in flight. He was confident that he could outrun any of the others with the possible exception of Gil Reardon, and he knew instinctively that Gil would not give chase. But he had his share of pride, and presently he accepted with fatalistic resignation the inevitability of the rôle he was about to play. There was after all nothing unfamiliar about the ritual of which he was now the centre. The novelty of the occasion rose from the fact that he was a principal, rather than merely an interested onlooker.

They reached the flats, and ten-year-old Floyd Rheinhart, the self-appointed master of ceremonies, led the way to a circle of soft green grass, flanked on one side by a "creek hole" of brackish water and on the other by a clump of willows that provided an excellent screen against Miss Piggott's prying eyes. "All right, you-uns," he said, "let's get started. Olaf, you second Neil, and Walt, you look after Gil. I'm referee. Hurry up now with the stakes."

With their heavy "scout" knives, two young Schultzes cut four willow stakes about three feet in length and hammered them into the ground with a flat rock to form a square. Then Floyd Rheinhart produced a length of binder-twine from his overalls pocket and stretched it around the stakes. Meanwhile, Walt Rheinhart and Olaf Svenson had filled tin syrup pails with water from the hole and had taken up positions in their respective corners. Minnie Whittaker was timekeeper, by virtue of being the only pupil in school to own a watch. Minnie looked worried. No doubt she felt that as senior pupil she should exercise her authority and attempt to stop the fight, but she lacked the necessary courage. She was a soft-hearted girl and likely to faint at the sight of blood. The others gathered expectantly about the ring, all except little Sigrud Svenson, who was weeping quietly down by the creek.

Preparations completed, Floyd Rheinhart summoned Neil and Gil to the centre of the ring. "Now listen, you-uns—you just keep fightin' until one of youse is licked, see? An' no hittin' below the belly. Aw right, get back to your corners an' when I give the word come out fightin'."

Neil returned to his corner. Olaf Svenson tied a piece of

binder-twine around his waist. "If he hits below here yust yell foul," he whispered. "Yell anyways if you get tired. Then you'll get a rest while Floyd says yes or no."

Gil Reardon came out of his corner in a crouch which he no doubt thought resembled the fighting stance of Jess Willard, the reigning world's champion. He drove at Neil's face with a wild swing that missed by two feet. Neil, standing bolt upright, countered with a straight left. Much to his surprise, his fist landed solidly on top of Gil's head, and the impact jarred his arm all the way to the shoulder. Then Gil closed and hit Neil squarely on the nose. Neil's eyes filled with tears and he could see only a dark blur in front of him. He lurched forward, threw his arms tightly around Gil, and hung on for dear life. At once Floyd Rheinhart sprang into action. "Break it up, you-uns—break it up!" he bawled. He wrapped an arm around Neil's neck and pulled. Neil's hold broke. He fell away and Gil hit him hard in the ribs. Neil felt the wind go out of his body, and he collapsed limply on the ground. Little Olaf Svenson rushed from his corner. "Foul! Foul!" he screamed at the top of his voice.

Floyd Rheinhart caught Olaf by the shoulder. "What d'ye mean foul? 'Tain't no foul when you get hit in the slats. Gil landed a foot above the belt."

"'Twas so a foul—'twas so a foul!" Olaf was hopping up and down in blind rage. "You had a holt of him by the neck and was chokin' him. You're a crook and a liar and—"

Floyd slapped him hard across the face. Olaf turned, caught up the pail of muddy water standing in his corner, and inverted it over Floyd's head. For a moment astonishment held Floyd motionless, then with a wild yell he hurled the pail across the ring and leapt upon Olaf. In an instant the two were rolling over and over on the grass, arms and legs flailing wildly. The others gathered around and screamed encouragement. Gil Reardon, sitting quietly on the ground in his corner, looked at the spectacle in disgust. He got up and walked over to Neil, who was still fighting hard to get his breath. "Too bad," he said. "Mostly things end up this way. But what can you expect from a bunch of Huns and Swedes."

Neil gasped in a lungful of air. He was suffering acute

physical pain, and he rejoiced ignobly in the chance that had saved him from complete public humiliation. He was no match for Gil Reardon and he knew it.

"Yep, too bad," he agreed, when he could speak. "But like you say—"

Suddenly a voice rose in a shrill scream. "Hey—break it up! She's comin'!"

The intertwined bodies on the grass rolled apart and became two upright entities—the ring vanished in a flash; and when Miss Piggott, her hands full of flowers, appeared around the edge of the screening bluff, her charges were scattered around the bank of the creek hole, most of them innocuously employed in throwing stones at an old tin can in the water. "Nature study this afternoon," Gil told Neil. "She's out gettin' samples. She's great on that sort of stuff."

Miss Piggott went away after a while, but Minnie Whittaker said there couldn't be any more fighting because there was only ten minutes of the noon hour left. "Well," said Gil philosophically, "guess we'll have to have it out some other time."

"Guess so," Neil agreed. He was relieved, and at the same time ashamed because he shook all over with sheer fright whenever he thought of what would happen to him when the fight was renewed. He wished passionately that there was some way whereby he could concede Gil's supremacy without loss of face. But there was none, and apprehension settled in the pit of his stomach like a weight of lead. Many times, in dreams, he had fought against boys older than himself. They had smashed him down, beaten him cruelly—at first—but always in the end he stood over his grovelling victim, bloody but triumphant, and listened scornfully to the mumbled apologies of the vanquished. But he knew that had he and Gil continued their fight, the ending would have been different. And he was troubled, not only because of what would happen to him some day, but because a dream which had been peculiarly real and precious had dissolved and vanished.

During last recess no one made any reference to the fight. All the pupils—even Floyd Rheinhart—took part in a vigorous and good-natured game of "scrub." Neil played well. He scored twice as many runs as anyone else, and Gil looked at him

with something like respect when he hit the ball half-way to the creek. "Good sockin', Neil," he said. "You can hit."

Neil did not say anything, but he was pleased. Perhaps, if they saw that he was the best ball-player in school, they would forget about the fight.

He was still batting when the bell rang. Gil shouted "last chance," and threw the ball to the plate. Neil hit a hard drive over Gil's head and raced to the base. He saw that Denny Schultz had fielded the ball, but there was nothing to lose now, so he sprinted for home. Denny threw the ball and Neil slid feet first into the plate. There was no need to slide because Floyd Rheinhart, who was catching, had dropped the ball. But Neil could not see what was happening, and besides, he fancied himself in the rôle of Ty Cobb. As he slithered across the rough board that did duty as home plate, the seat of his overalls caught in a projecting nail-head and ripped from top to bottom. There was no time to effect repairs, for Miss Piggott was at the porch door now, adding her voice to the summons of the bell. Neil got quickly to his feet and, holding the torn overalls together as best he could, limped after his companions. One or two of the boys jeered at him without malice, but Neil did not mind. The girls had already gone inside without witnessing what had happened. Neil knew that after school was dismissed he could remain in his seat until the room had cleared, then slip out and home by himself across the fields. Aunt Em would probably be cross, for the overalls were new, but Neil had already learned that Aunt Em's anger was neither ferocious nor long-lived.

The last hour of school seemed intolerably long. Neil tried without much success to concentrate on the dog-eared geography book that lay open in front of him. But his eyes kept straying to the window near his desk. A few blue-bottles were buzzing aimlessly against the panes, and he felt for them a certain sense of kinship. They, like him, were prisoners.

It was hot in the room. Even Miss Piggott seemed to drowse. The air grew heavier with every dragging minute. The windows of the school had been hermetically sealed the last time the building was painted, and there were no blinds to guard against the fierce rays of the sun. Neil nodded, awoke with a start,

and, in a determined effort to fight off drowsiness and boredom, took an old scribbler from his desk and began work on a sketch of Miss Piggott. He had some skill in caricature and the resulting portrait was recognizable, even to the faint shadowing of a moustache. He labelled the finished work, folded it up and prepared to pass it at first opportunity to little Sigrud Svenson who sat directly ahead of him.

He looked around and saw Gil Reardon staring at him from across the aisle. Gil's eyes flickered, almost imperceptibly he jerked his head. Neil stiffened. With a movement elaborately careless he slid one hand over the sketch and with the other flicked the pages of his geography book. He knew, although he had not seen her, that Miss Piggott was standing directly behind his desk. He had no idea how long she had been there, so absorbed had he been in adding the finishing touches to his work. He waited tensely for her next move.

"Neil Fraser, give me that paper."

Her voice was heavy with menace. Neil lifted his eyes from the page in front of him. "What paper, Miss Piggott?" All the time his fingers were wadding the portrait into a tight little ball.

"This paper," said Miss Piggott, and reached for the crumpled ball between his fingers. Neil raised his hand to his mouth. For a moment astonishment held Miss Piggott voiceless. Then her long fingers twisted themselves into the collar of his shirt, and words rushed forth in a scandalized shriek.

"Neil Fraser, go to the corner at once!"

Neil gagged, and spat out fragments of paper. Misery engulfed him. Unfamiliar with Miss Piggott's punishment technique, he had assumed that a strapping was the worst that could befall him. Unwittingly, Miss Piggott had hit upon a torture far more diabolical. To be kept in after school and strapped—to be deprived of recesses for days and weeks to come—to be compelled to write out hundreds of lines of proverbs stressing the virtues of obedience—these things Neil could have tolerated, conscious that he had merited some sort of punishment. But to stand in the corner with his back to his schoolmates was a penalty which circumstances made unendurable.

For once he acted with decision. In apparent obedience to

orders he stood up. He felt Miss Piggott's hold on his shirt collar relax, turned in a flash and ran out through the cloak-room door. He was outside before Miss Piggott realized his intention. By the time she reached the door he was half-way down the hill that led to the creek, running like a deer.

Not until he had followed the creek for half a mile or more toward its mouth did he stop to draw breath. He flopped down beside a water-hole, breathed in great gulps of air, and presently forced himself to consider the possible consequences of his action. And, indeed, the situation was an awkward one. Not only would he have a future reckoning with Miss Piggott, but with his aunt and uncle as well. Uncle Matt, he was sure, would not say very much, although he would look unhappy, but Aunt Em might be dangerous if pushed too far. But for the moment the shadows of the future did not lie too darkly across Neil's path. He was still in the grip of wild excitement, and he found the past half-hour magnificent to recall. In the face of the whole school he had defied Miss Piggott. His satisfaction in his achievement was complete, since it did not occur to him that his defiance had stemmed from anything other than stern moral courage. It was pleasant, too, to reflect on the reputation which he would henceforth enjoy in the eyes of his schoolmates. Or, at least, until he and Gil Reardon fought again.

A noise in the bushes near the top of the bank disturbed him and he leapt to his feet, ready for instant flight. Gil Reardon slithered down the bank and sprawled at Neil's feet. He got up and brushed the leaves off his overalls. "Hello," he said. He seemed oddly embarrassed.

"Hello," said Neil. He scuffed in the mud of the creek bank with his bare toe.

"There's a good hole 'bout quarter of a mile down," said Gil. "Like a dip?"

"Sure."

They started down the creek, Gil leading the way along a faintly defined path. Presently he spoke over his shoulder. "School ain't out yet."

"How did you get away?"

"I just got up and left."

Neil was silent. Beside Gil's bravado, his own seemed to

shrink into unimportance. What he had done he had done because he was trapped. But Gil's act of revolt had been committed in cold blood. He had defied authority simply because it had pleased him to do so. In the face of such overwhelming evidence of moral superiority, Neil felt abashed.


They reached the swimming pool, a deep black hole shaded on both sides by willows. They slipped off their clothes and plunged in. The water was icy cold, but neither ventured to complain. They splashed and swam until their skins were blue and covered with goose-pimples, and their teeth chattering. At last Gil spoke. "I hate to go, but I figger your folks will be mad enough when they hear about what you did in school without you bein' late gettin' in the cows as well."

"Shucks, I don't care what they think," said Neil resolutely. "But I guess it won't do the cows any good bein' late. They're pretty fresh."

They dressed quickly, retraced their steps along the path and, giving the school a wide berth, reached the level fields beyond. Just before they separated, Gil thrust his hands into his overalls pocket and stood looking at Neil. "I'm glad you're comin' to school, Neil," he said. "The others are just kids. We could lick the whole bunch of them."

Neil blushed with pleasure. "We sure could, Gil," he said.

And suddenly he was no longer fearful of what anyone might do to him. It had been a great day. And he had found a friend.



Chapter Three

FOR A FEW SHORT weeks summer flamed over the land. The sun rose far to the north and blazed down with unrelenting fury through days that were separated from each other by no more than an hour or two of darkness. But the heat which threatened to blast the growing crops created by its very intensity a counterbalance in the violent thunderstorms which rolled up from the west two or three times weekly and drenched the thirsty soil. The storms terrified Neil, especially if they broke after he had gone to bed. They were far more violent and spectacular than anything he had ever seen in the east, and he had always been a little afraid of lightning. But his aunt and uncle accepted the storms as a matter of course, and Neil kept his fears to himself. Only, when the lightning was especially bad, he would put the pillow over his head and pray with passionate earnestness to God for protection. He always felt a little ashamed after the storm had passed, but he could never feel the house vibrating to the thunder peals, or see the lightning leap in jagged forks across an inky sky without visualizing what would happen if the lightning should strike the house. Then he would experience a painful contraction of the muscles in his throat and stomach, and in spite of the sternest resolutions made earlier in the evening, he would bury his head under the pillow and lie trembling until the noise and vibration had passed far away.

As July waned, an undercurrent of nervous excitement seemed to spread through the countryside. The crops were the best in years; the wheat stood three and four feet high, and the heads were long and full. Most of the oats around Pine Creek had lodged badly, bowed down by their own lushness, but they could be cut one way, and in 1918 even a bushel of oats was worth money. It was a golden time for the western farmer, and

there were many who in their hearts shared Old Man Hunter's hope that the Germans might hang on a year or two longer—long enough to permit the selling of at least two more crops at record prices. After that, what happened wouldn't matter very much because everybody would be rich.

Not that the district had failed to play its part in the fight. In the immediate vicinity of the Pine Creek schoolhouse three homesteads were running to weeds, pending settlement of the estates. Their owners, all single men, were dead in France. So were Billy Svenson and Arnold Haskins and Lloyd Peers. And already the lame and the halt and the blind were coming home. Joe MacNamara, the greatest ball-player ever seen in Pine Creek, was back on his homestead. But he had only one leg now, and part of his face had been shot away. Neil saw him for the first time at the Dominion Day picnic, sitting on the bench with the home team, and rooting in a voice that sounded strained and unnatural. He wore a black patch that covered one side of his face. For many nights thereafter Neil lay awake wondering what the face beneath the patch looked like. Len Haskins, Arnold's brother, was in the sanatorium in the city. The doctors had said it would be two years at least before he would be up and around, but even Mrs. Haskins knew that Len would never come home again. The Peterson boys, Joe and Oscar, were both back. Joe had lost an eye and Oscar had been invalided out because of stomach ulcers. Neil and Gil Reardon had looked on Oscar with contempt until they saw the M.C. ribbon on his chest. It seemed a pity, though, that he couldn't have come home on crutches, or with his arm in a sling.

Neil and Gil Reardon were inseparable companions now. Neil's friendship for Gil had, in the beginning, a practical objective. He wanted Gil to forget about the fight that was still to come, and he sought to placate him in every way possible, even to the extent of offering him his treasured "scout" knife. Gil accepted the gift without much comment. But he was pleased all the same, and the next day he brought Neil an air-gun. It was an old gun, but still operable. The exchange of gifts was tantamount to burying the hatchet; and thereafter Neil went to sleep at night in the comfortable assurance that next day he would not be called upon to face Gil's whirling fists. From

then on his allegiance to Gil was staunch and unswerving. At school they were the only Britishers—for although Gil was black Irish and argued fiercely with Neil about English oppression, he was a stout supporter of the Empire in all its military operations. And because nearly all the others at school—the Svensons and the Rheinharts and the Schultzes—were Swedes or Pennsylvania Dutch and hence members of neutral and inferior races, Neil and Gil looked upon themselves as the natural aristocracy of the community.

"I'm pure Irish and you're mostly Scotch with some English and Irish mixed in," Gil said. "And it's us who's winnin' the war. The French and Russians would have been wiped out long ago if it hadn't been for us, and the Yankees come in after we'd done all the work. As for the Swedes and the Dutch—" He shook his head.

Neil shook his head, too, and spat with grave deliberation. "I guess that's the way it is, all right," he said. And he looked at young Denny Schultz with dignified distaste.

His friendship with Gil did not go unopposed at home. Aunt Em was consistently vehement and bitter in her denunciations of the black Irish, and even Uncle Matt hinted, in a troubled, self-conscious way, that it might be as well to come straight home after school, instead of spending an hour or two in Gil Reardon's company. But Neil's allegiance was unswerving; and once he even went so far as to bring Gil home to supper. Afterwards, Aunt Em grudgingly admitted that Gil's manners were better than you might expect of a Reardon; but she made no further concessions, and when Neil asked permission to pay Gil a return visit, she refused him point-blank.

Neil was puzzled and angry. "Aunt Em," he demanded, "what's wrong with the Reardons? Why don't you like them?"

Aunt Em got red in the face. "Gil's sister is a bad woman. That's reason enough!"

"But what has she done?"

"You're too young to understand. But she's a bad woman. And there's a black streak in the whole tribe. Now run along and don't bother me."

Neil left her, troubled and unhappy. He would have liked to ask Uncle Matt about the Reardons, but he could not bring

himself to the point of introducing such a delicate subject. Uncle Matt was kind and harmless, but his taciturnity made him hard to approach. With Aunt Em you always knew how she felt about things and where you stood. But with Uncle Matt you could never tell, and Neil did not often have the courage to find out.

In spite of its petty worries and disappointments, the new life was a happy one. For one thing, Neil enjoyed an almost unlimited amount of freedom. Back on the Ontario farm the round of chores had seemed endless—in the morning cows to milk, calves, pigs and chickens to feed—after school and on Saturdays long hours to be endured in the garden, hoeing, weeding, picking strawberries, and later on, potatoes and turnips. These were jobs that Neil had hated from the very depths of his being—hated because of the sheer physical exertion which they involved, and because they kept him from his beloved fields and streams and woods.

But things were different now. In the morning Neil milked one cow, brought in a few armfuls of wood from the big pile outside the kitchen, fed the two calves, and was thereafter free of chores until it was time to bring home the cows for the evening milking. On Saturdays and Sundays he was free to roam wherever he willed. Aunt Em and Uncle Matt had been childless all their lives; they had grown used to solitariness, and Neil was a disturbance. Aunt Em, in whom all disciplinary authority was vested, no doubt felt a detached affection for the boy because he was young and helpless and her own flesh and blood. But things seemed easier, more natural, when he was not around. So she tended to leave him almost wholly to his own devices, interfering with his freedom of action only when he did something directly counter to her wishes.

He had a saddle-pony now, that was all his own. The fine little bay two-year-old that Uncle Matt had given him had responded quickly to the training of Duke Panchot, renowned all through the country as a horse-breaker. Duke was a big, loose-jointed "Yankee," so-called in the community because he had come from the States. At first Duke had protested violently whenever addressed by the hated epithet, but as time went on he grew philosophical. "Just ignorance, plain, honest-

to-God ignorance," he explained to Neil one day, while elaborating the distinction between a Yankee and a Southerner. "When I saw they didn't *mean* to be insultin', I give up gittin' mad."

The two-year-old pony was, at Duke's suggestion, named Jeff, in honour of Jefferson Davis. He was more important in Neil's life than any human being except Gil Reardon. Neil went everywhere on Jeff, riding bareback like an Indian, and within a month he knew every inch of the countryside for miles around. His favourite ride was straight north to the high bank overlooking the yellow Saskatchewan. Occasionally he drove the reluctant Jeff down the bank and through the tangle of willows and Saskatoon bushes to the edge of the swirling, treacherous water. Across the river was Ultima Thule, a land invested with a sinister charm. An Indian reservation lay a few miles north; there white men had died in the time of the Riel rebellion. Even yet there were old-timers in the district who could remember the days when the Cree Indians had risen in support of the revolting *métis*. Bill McKinley, who farmed half a mile west of the Jardines, had been one of a score of settlers kidnapped by Big Bear and his band; for nearly two months they had wandered with the Indians through forest and muskeg until rescued by General Strange's men. Uncle Matt had promised that some day they would cross the river on the ferry a few miles west and drive to the scene of the massacre that had occurred at the Hudson's Bay Post on the reservation. Thus it was that the land "across the river" was associated in Neil's mind with the West he had so often read about—the West of red Indians and embattled settlers, of adventure and romance and violent death. Even now it was a lawless land, where moonshiners flourished and the Indians lived and hunted as they had done long ago, before the coming of the white men.

Not that the Indians were likely to shoot or kidnap anybody now. Neil saw them often, rattling about the country in wagons and democrats, looking for work. They picked up a good deal of seasonal employment, cutting brush on the bush lands in summer and harvesting in the fall. They were dark-skinned, not red, and some of the men wore elaborately embroidered buckskin jackets and did their hair in long braids. Otherwise there was little about them to excite a second glance.

They were always present in large numbers at the various community picnics. They rode their cayuses well in the horse-races, although they seldom had the horseflesh to win. But they were set apart in Neil's mind because they came from across the river where in an earlier time violent death had stalked. They belonged to a part of the country that was different because it was old where all else was new. The fact that its past was stained with blood made it all the more significant and impressive.

Because there was so much of interest in the present, Neil's yesterdays receded into the past with the swiftness of a dream. He thought often of his mother, particularly at night, with a passionate longing that sometimes found relief in tears—and of his father, who had never been really close to him, with a vague and wistful regret. But his life in the east, as a whole, was no longer even a substantial recollection. He relived, occasionally, a few isolated experiences; and recalled with distinctness only one or two of the many individuals who had helped to make up the sum of that other life. He was a young and healthy animal, with an animal's capacity to forget.

August came in with a blaze of heat that cast a faint yellow tinge across the green of the wheat-fields, a tinge that deepened and spread until it was a colour in itself. Throughout the district the tension increased steadily. Uncle Matt, for the first time in his life, saw financial security almost within reach, and the golden vision so distracted him that he was unable to sleep. He went to bed almost immediately after supper, tossed restlessly for a few hours, and was up again at three o'clock. There was little for him to do; but he contrived to pass much of the time tinkering with the binder, replacing worn cog-wheels, and cracked reel and canvas slats. And all day the dust hung like smoke over the long trail to town, stirred up by wagons and democrats loaded with binder-twine, machine repairs, and all the innumerable items of supply that harvest demands. The finest crop in the history of Pine Creek was almost ripe; and every farmer waited in agonized impatience for the morning when he could drive his outfit into the golden field. Once the cutting actually began, once the first round had been made, the tension would relax. It was the helpless waiting that told on men's nerves.



Help was scarce in the autumn of 1918, and even broken-down wrecks like Old Man Tracey, who couldn't stook more than three or four acres of light crop a day, were demanding a dollar an hour. But Uncle Matt was unperturbed by the labour problem. Every fall for many years Aunt Em had gone out to the fields and stooked ten or twelve hours a day. Twenty years ago she had been the physical equal of most men. During the past four or five seasons, Uncle Matt had knocked off from time to time and helped her, but it never seemed to occur to him that the day would come when he would have to look for another stoker. Now, to help Aunt Em, there was Neil.

"Not that you'll be much help at first," Uncle Matt explained at the breakfast table one morning, "but you can make a start. Figger mebbe two cents a stook would be fair pay." And he chuckled thinly, like one not used to it.

"Gosh, Uncle," said Neil, wide-eyed, "that'll be great. I bet I'll work better than any hired man you ever had." And immediately he was busy trying to calculate the fabulous wealth that would be his. Good stokers, so he had heard, could put up five or six hundred stooks a day. Supposing he did only half as much, that was six dollars a day!

"Mind now," Aunt Em interjected sharply, "you only get paid for the stooks that stay put."

Uncle Matt chuckled again. "Figger we'll mebbe swing into her Monday." He tried to speak casually, but there was a tremor of nervous excitement in his voice.

"Can't be too soon for me," said Aunt Em. "Time you begun to sleep again nights."

Saturday, a day of intense heat, culminated in a violent thunderstorm and deluge of rain. The storm subsided, but the skies did not clear. All day Sunday the rain beat down steadily, falling from grey clouds that drifted past a few hundred feet overhead. Uncle Matt's face was as grey as the skies. "Cuttin's set back a week already—mebbe more," he muttered, staring out of the window at the rivulet of water running down the path that led to the barn. "An' the oats'll be down so flat we'll be lucky to pick up twenty bushel to the acre. Should have got eighty."

Towards evening the rain stopped. Neil put on his rubber

boots and old slicker and rode off on Jeff for the cows. The clouds still hung low but they no longer presented a solid blanket of grey; they moved now as individual entities, with occasional glimpses of blue about their borders. The wind blew from the north-west. It was cold, so cold that by the time Neil reached the barn with the cows his teeth were chattering.

"Looks like it's going to clear all right, Uncle Matt," he said, as he slid from Jeff's wet back. "Maybe we'll be able to get started Tuesday or Wednesday. The ground seems to be drying up fast."

"Mebbe there won't be anythin' worth cuttin' by Wednesday."

Uncle Matt's voice was harsh. Then he went on, with studied matter-of-factness. "If it clears off tonight she'll freeze sure. Glass is down near forty right now."

They ate supper without appetite, in a silence that was strained and oppressive. Afterwards, Uncle Matt said that tonight he would drive the cows to the pasture himself. Neil, who wanted another ride on Jeff, began to insist on his rights. But Aunt Em silenced him with a look. After Uncle Matt had gone out, Neil renewed his protests. "I was just trying to help," he explained virtuously. "It's an awful cold night and I could turn the cows out a lot quicker than Uncle Matt can. He'll be just about frozen by the time he gets back."

Aunt Em sloshed soap into the dishpan full of hot water. "He's got to keep movin'," she said tersely. "He'll be pretty near crazy by sun-up."

The old man was gone a long time. He returned with his rubber boots caked with mud from top to bottom. "Took a look at the south fence," he said, by way of explanation. "We'll have to tighten her up one of these days."

Night fell, dark and lowering. But away to the west a band of flaming red ran like a border between earth and heaven. The thermometer had dropped to thirty-eight degrees above zero—only six degrees above freezing. But there was hope so long as the sky remained overcast. When Neil went to bed, faint light still lingered on the horizon and the band had widened perceptibly. It was cold in the garret room. Shivering, he crept in between icy sheets and almost immediately fell asleep.

Some time in the night he was awakened by the sound of a door banging below. He listened, and heard footsteps outside, moving around to the back of the house. Uncle Matt was looking at the thermometer, which hung on the north wall of the kitchen. Through the window Neil could see the stars blazing in a dusky violet sky.

When he awoke again the sun was shining brilliantly. He kicked off the covers and ran to the window. Although mists were rising from the river-bed and low-lying flats, the sky was clear from horizon to horizon. But on the ground the hoar-frost lay thick and white, and the grass, stiffened into the rigidity of countless upright corpses, sparkled in the morning sunshine.

Neil dressed quickly and went down to breakfast. Aunt Em was busy in the kitchen. "Did it freeze very hard?" he asked.

"Pretty hard. Thermometer registered eight degrees."

Her voice was the same as usual. Aunt Em had long since been hardened to the cruelty of nature. But Uncle Matt's shoulders drooped a little lower. "We won't know just how bad she's hit for a day or two," he said. "But the spuds are froze black and there was quarter of an inch of ice in the trough when I got up." He broke off and stared out of the window over the big field of breaking.

"Should have made forty bushel easy," he said. "Oh, well, mebbe next year things'll be different."

But his voice carried no conviction. Uncle Matt no longer believed in next year.

Chapter Four

IN THE GREAT wheatlands of the West, fall is a season unique for the intensity of effort it calls forth. Into a brief two months is concentrated almost as much work as is spread through the remaining ten. In the wheatlands, man wagers everything on a single crop. After the seed is planted he is for three months powerless; he can do no more than watch the sky and the thermometer and wait with anxious heart until harvest-time. But the moment the grain is ripe he throws himself with a kind of concentrated fury into the great task of reaping his yearly profits while there is time. Every day lost may mean hundreds of dollars lost. For in the Canadian West the autumn weather is not always dependable; and the October Indian summer sometimes never comes at all. Instead, there may be drenching rains or unseasonable snows that lodge the standing grain and lower the grade. Hence the brief season between summer and winter is one of unparalleled bustle and activity, and every moment of daylight is utilized, from the first flush of dawn to the last lingering streak of sunset.

Neil stooked in the fields behind the binder—at first not more than three or four hours a day—but longer and longer as the season advanced. Aunt Em gave him some help and much advice. It was she who instructed him in the art of planting his first two sheaves butt downwards in the stubble to form a solid core around which the other sheaves could be set. But she complained a good deal about her rheumatism, and since it was not important that the frozen grain be stooked as soon as possible after cutting, she was at length content to leave the work entirely to Neil. At first, in spite of blistered hands, he enjoyed the work, but the novelty soon wore off. The drudgery was intensified because Uncle Matt had been compelled to withdraw the two cents wages for every stook that Neil put up. “Mebbe I

could manage quarter of a cent," he said, "but we'd better call it a flat twenty-five cents a day. I got to make a payment on that C.P.R. quarter this year for sure on account of I missed last. And the interest mounts up somethin' awful. Started payments six years ago and now I owe more than when I started. Wheat won't grade more than feed, I figger, but even then it'll be worth somethin'—what there is of it."

After the routine drudgery of cutting and stooking, came the actual threshing of the grain. Neil, accustomed to the small, hand-fed outfit that came each year to the Ontario farm and threshed his father's stacks of oats, was awed by Sven Svenson's mighty steam outfit. The crew, made up of engineer, fireman, separator man, tank man, eight stook teams and four spike and field pitchers, was like a small army. They cleaned up Uncle Matt's fields in less than two days. Neil did not miss a minute of the thrilling experience. He got up the moment he heard the long shrill whistle of the engine, which Oscar Svenson had already been firing for an hour, slipped into his clothes and hurried downstairs to find breakfast almost ready. The extension table in the kitchen was drawn out to its full length and augmented by two smaller tables from the living-room in order to accommodate the crew who came swarming in from the caboose—sixteen hungry men all told. Most of the crewmen were Indians from across the river. They ate silently and with a concentration of interest that fascinated Neil. He helped his aunt as much as he could, refilling cups with strong black coffee, replenishing platters of bacon and fried potatoes and bread cut an inch thick, that were cleared almost as soon as they reached the table.

After the men had gone to the fields, just at daybreak, Neil brought the two cows in from pasture and milked them. Then he filled the woodbox, carried water for the stove reservoir and the two buckets that stood on the side table by the window, and was free to go to the field, where the big separator was spilling grain down a long spout into the waiting wagons at a rate of a hundred and fifty bushels an hour. It was poor wheat, shrunken, tough and colourless, but in 1918 any kind of grain brought a good price.

It was while he was doing some voluntary field pitching that

Neil first heard Helen Martell's name. He had gone out with Frenchy Dubois, a métis from St. Paul, and George Patterson, an Englishman who worked intermittently, between drinking bouts, at various district farms. Patterson was a big man whose health had been undermined by periodic sprees to such an extent that none of the military services would look at him. He found it hard to pitch sheaves twelve hours a day and welcomed the relief which Neil provided. "Go right ahead, son," he said. "Keep it up just as long as you like."

Neil tossed sheaves wildly onto the rack, in order to demonstrate his prowess. Patterson sat down on a sheaf and flipped a package of tobacco from his shirt pocket. Frenchy Dubois looked at him with a sardonic glint in his eye. "You restin' up for when we get to the Martells'?"

Patterson licked the gummed edge of a thin brown cigarette paper, and rolled the cigarette between nicotine-stained fingers. "Don't imagine things, Frenchy," he said mildly. "Helen Martell doesn't keep open house, you know—only for a few select friends."

"And you ain't select, hey?" Frenchy leaned on his fork and grinned evilly. "Not like Charlie Steele?"

Patterson got to his feet. His face was suddenly dark. "That's enough," he said. "No more yapping about Helen Martell and Charlie Steele, you bloody little mongrel."

Frenchy's lips twisted into an ugly snarl. For a moment Neil thought he was going to use his pitchfork on Patterson. Then he turned his head away and spat into the dust. "Sure 'ting, George, if that's the way you feel," he said pacifically. "You just ain't got used to t'ings yet." And he returned to his own side of the rack.

That night, after he had dried the dishes and helped reset the table, Neil spoke to Aunt Em. "Who's Helen Martell?"

Aunt Em turned on him. "What have you been hearin' about Helen Martell?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," Neil said quickly. "Just that Frenchy and George were talking about going to Helen Martell's."

Aunt Em's lips were set in a thin line. "Helen Martell is Gil

Reardon's sister," she said. "Her husband is over fightin' in France. But she sees to it that she ain't lonesome."

Neil nodded. He didn't know what Aunt Em meant, but he didn't like the way she was talking. And he couldn't help feeling a bit queer when he recalled how Patterson and Frenchy had looked when they were talking about Helen Martell. He wondered who Charlie Steele was. But he was wise enough not to ask Aunt Em. He found out next morning from Doc Wilkins, the tank man of the outfit, when he rode with Wilkins down to the river for a tank of water. "Charlie Steele lives five mebbe six miles west, right at the big bend in among the sand-hills. A crazy Englishman like George Patterson, only worse. Remittance man. Can't grow nothin' on his farm and don't care. Says he's got the best view in the country and that's all that matters." Doc laughed and spat over the side of the tank.

"Enlisted the first day of the war," he went on, "an' got knocked out movin' up to the trenches. Never fired a shot. He come home two years ago and ain't done a stroke of work since. But he ain't neglected his pleasures none to speak of." And Doc winked significantly.

Neil did not understand the meaning of the wink. But he knew that Doc Wilkins was thinking of Helen Martell. Helen was Gil's sister, so she must be all right; but just the same, Neil was troubled. His uneasiness expressed itself in resentment against Doc Wilkins; for the rest of the way back from the river he sat hunched up on top of the tank, silent except when one of Doc's questions provoked him to a non-committal grunt.

The big steam outfit completed its work and pulled away to a neighbouring farm. It was late October now, and the ground frozen so hard that fall ploughing was out of the question. For Neil it was a time of complete freedom. He and Gil Reardon met by agreement at some pre-arranged spot nearly every day, and with traps slung over their shoulders explored the creek and near-by sloughs for muskrats. Neil learned to set his traps under water, in the runways that the muskrats kept open; he learned to skin the muskrats he caught and stretch their hides on boards shaped for the purpose under Gil's direction. After the first snow fell at the beginning of November he learned to distinguish the tracks of the little fur-bearing animals that

haunted the bluffs and coulees. On Gil's advice he sent to the Hudson's Bay Company's store in Winnipeg for "bait"—a bottle of foul-smelling, brownish liquid, guaranteed, if rubbed on a piece of meat, to lure weasels to their destruction. He did, in fact, have fair luck with his trapping, and after one or two disastrous preliminary experiences learned how to skin a weasel without breaking off any part of the black-tipped tail, wherein lay the greater part of the value of the hide.

Time, as well as enriching his experience, added to his possessions. Uncle Matt could not afford a saddle for Jeff; instead, he bought Neil a second-hand twenty-two rifle at a sale, and thereafter Neil was an indefatigable hunter of rabbit and prairie-chicken. Aunt Em did not seem very keen about his occasional "bags," but her lack of enthusiasm did not dampen his ardour for the chase. On one glorious occasion he fired at a white-tailed deer, the first he had ever seen, just as the animal bounded over the crest of the high creek bank. The shot had no visible effect on the deer, but Neil now regarded himself as a big-game hunter. A week later he shot one of the Rheinharts' six-months-old calves in the neck. Since the range was over one hundred yards, the beast suffered no serious injury, but Neil had learned a salutary lesson, and was thereafter careful to identify his quarry before pulling the trigger.

The Armistice of November 11, 1918, which brought the World War to an end, had no immediate effect on the life of the community. There was rejoicing in some homes, from which men had gone to fight, but to most of the people in Pine Creek the news came as a matter of course. Neil's chief emotion was one of regret. He and Gil had planned to go into the air force together, and his disappointment was keen. But Gil was philosophic. "We don't need to worry," he said. "There'll always be a war we can get into when we're ready."

Old Man Hunter found consolation for the signing of the Armistice in the news of the poverty-stricken condition of Europe. "Won't be growin' no crops to speak of for two, mebbe three, years. By then we won't care." And although no one else would admit it, he spoke for many besides himself.

It was at Christmas that Neil, for the first time in months,

and more intensely than ever before, felt the pain of separation from his old home. Back on the Ontario farm the family had celebrated Christmas with a seriousness and a ritualistic pomp that were thrilling and impressive. He remembered the carol-singing in the front parlour, several days before Christmas, when all the neighbours gathered and sang their lungs out, and afterwards replenished their sapped vitality with vast quantities of the rich food which his mother had prepared in the big kitchen. The ritual was repeated in various homes, right up until Christmas Eve. The bringing home of the tree was another memorable event. About a week before Christmas his father would sharpen the axe, get out the long toboggan from the shed, and say to Neil, "Well, son, I guess it's time to bring in the tree." And they would strike out across the pasture, his father in the lead, pulling the sleigh and breathing heavily because his heart was bad, although he wouldn't admit it, until they reached the woods. There the pine trees stood tall and straight, their branches bowed under the weight of snow. Every year the tree seemed bigger, thicker, than the one of the year before. Neil and his mother always decorated the tree with great care, mostly with ornaments that his mother had made herself. She was full of good ideas about decorations. On Christmas Eve the three of them sang carols around the organ, his mother playing and singing both, then he would go upstairs to bed and lie awake a long time, trying to detect stealthy, rustling noises down below. But after a while he would fall asleep, and in the morning he would creep down just as soon as it was daylight and see the presents stacked under the tree and shout "Merry Christmas!" And his father and mother would come out in their dressing-gowns, and as soon as the fires were lit they would sit around the tree and open their presents, and laugh and talk excitedly until it was time for the extra-special Christmas breakfast that heralded a day of feasting.

It wasn't that Aunt Em and Uncle Matt didn't try. Uncle Matt went all the way to the river to find a tree, and Aunt Em got a lot of paper bells and artificial snow through the catalogue. But nothing was the same. And when, on Christmas morning, Neil came downstairs and saw his presents under the tree in a

corner of the cold, cheerless sitting-room, instead of shouting "Merry Christmas!" he began to cry, silently, and crept back upstairs, where he stayed until Aunt Em called him. There was a pair of skates among his presents, and after breakfast he went down to the creek, cleared a small patch of ice, and skated until he was tired out. After dinner Aunt Em and Uncle Matt sat nodding around the heater and Neil played listlessly with his games. That night he went to bed as soon as he could and cried himself to sleep.

To Neil's dismay, school began immediately after Christmas. Hitherto the school had been open only during the summer months, from May to September. But a new order reigned in the district now, and in great bitterness of spirit Neil plodded a mile and a half through drifted snow on the opening day. The thermometer was near the zero mark and the schoolroom icy cold. The shiny new Quebec heater, that seemed to take up half the room, refused to draw, and at noon Miss Piggott sent the pupils home. Next morning Morris Langley, chairman of the board of trustees, took a bird's nest out of the chimney and thereafter the heater worked better. But the schoolroom was seldom comfortable until noon, and in the mornings the children often worked with coats and caps on.

Early in the term Neil found a new and exciting interest. The circumstance occasioning the discovery was commonplace enough. Miss Piggott was a firm believer in "reading out loud" for all grades. Every afternoon Neil took his turn with the other pupils in reading a "piece" from his reader, his one object being to finish the job as quickly as possible and get back to his seat. One afternoon Minnie Whittaker, the only Grade Eight pupil in the school, was standing at her desk reading. It was the last hour of the day, invariably a somnolent period. The heater had by that time warmed to its work and was blasting forth waves of hot air, and the atmosphere of the room was oppressively heavy. Neil was bored and irritated. He and Gil Reardon had exchanged notes until neither could think of anything more to write about; he had aimlessly flipped a few paper wads across the aisle, unbraided Sigrud Svenson's pigtail as far up as the big gingham bow that adorned it, and taken a few desultory glances into the history book on his desk. All the time he was battling

the inclination to sleep. Then he heard Minnie Whittaker's voice—

The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep
Moans round with many voices. . . .

Neil stirred and sat up straighter. Minnie Whittaker was not pleasing to look at. She was tall and gangling and excessively freckled. And she had adenoids. But in spite of the adenoids she read well; recitations by Minnie Whittaker were standard programme items in all school concerts. She read on:

Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.

Inexplicably, Neil experienced an emotion as profoundly disturbing as that accompanying an instantaneous religious conversion. His consciousness fastened itself upon a single phrase, "to sail beyond the sunset," and there was set in motion a gorgeous pageant that passed and repassed before his mind's eye—a vision of sunlight sparkling on water, of strange, bronzed warriors—he did not see them as old, but young and strong—taking their places in a long boat with curved prow, and rowing far away across the blue water into the track of light that danced and shimmered before them.

The scene shifted. He saw them landing on a shore that stretched far inland—a wide, smooth plain giving way at last to steep hills and jagged crests. And through a pass in the hills he could glimpse the blue of distances reaching, so it seemed, beyond the borders of the world itself. The men advanced across the plain, spread out in a long, wavering line. Then the sun dropped behind the hills, and night shut out the scene.

That evening, by the light of the smoky oil-lamp in the kitchen, Neil read and re-read "Ulysses." The next day he found a volume of Tennyson's poems in the school library and took it home with him. He was disappointed in what he read. Nearly all the poems were silly or incomprehensible, about

Claribel and Maud and freedom sitting on the heights. But he persevered in his search for something that would satisfy the strange longing that now tormented him, and by accident stumbled upon "The Isles of Greece." For two weeks he read nothing but Byron. Again he found much that was incomprehensible, but this time there were compensations—poems like "The Destruction of Sennecherib's Army" and "Waterloo." In the first flush of enthusiasm, he tried to share his discoveries with Gil Reardon. But Gil was non-committal. "There may be something in it," he said judicially, as they tramped through the deep snow to inspect their weasel traps. "But the way I see it, poetry's for women." Not even Neil's vigorous declamation of "The Isles of Greece" could shake his opinion. "Sounds all right," he acknowledged. "Only I don't see that it *means* much."

Neil persevered with his reading, but thereafter kept his enthusiasm to himself. Miss Piggott was not a person in whom one could confide, and he knew that at home his latest interest would be regarded with blank incomprehension. Because his reading was thus uncontrolled at a time when it needed intelligent direction, he experienced many disappointments. The school library was an indiscriminate collection of classics and moderns, ranging from Milton to Ella Wheeler Wilcox, and from Fielding to Ethel M. Dell. Neil began each book he took out with enthusiasm; but after a few pages he usually became confused and lost heart. He had to read so much that was dry or boring or incomprehensible before finding something that he could mope over and over, something like "Hohenlinden" or "The Highwayman," that kept alive the feeling and the vision created by "Ulysses."

Unexpectedly, he found the encouragement and guidance he so sorely needed. A stranger supplied them, and probably never realized completely what he had done. Neil met the stranger under prosaic circumstances. Dave Schultz had bought a horse at an auction sale held on the Drysdale farm several miles west of the Jardines'. The following day the horse broke out of the corral and escaped. Since the day was Saturday, Neil offered to help find the animal. He mounted Jeff, full of good spirits, for he liked nothing better than an excuse to

go riding, and rode west along the road-allowance until he reached a part of the country which was new to him. He was about to turn back—reluctantly, for he wanted to have the honour of finding the stray—when he saw a shack perched on the crest of a small hill overlooking the river. The shack was unpainted and weather-beaten. Tar-paper which covered the roof was peeling off in long strips that flapped in the stiff breeze. There were no curtains at the window, but a few wisps of smoke curling from a rusty stove-pipe showed that the shack was occupied. Neil slid down from Jeff's back, tied the pony to a convenient tree and knocked on the door. A voice bade him come in. He pushed open the door and stepped inside.

A man was sitting at a plain board table in the centre of the room, a deck of cards spread out in front of him. He stood up when Neil entered and the boy saw that he was very tall and slim, with long fair hair, so fair that it seemed almost white. His blue eyes were bloodshot, and he seemed unsteady on his feet. "How d'ye do?" he said, in a voice unmistakably "old-country."

Neil stood awkwardly in the doorway. "I'm looking for one of Dave Schultz's horses," he explained. "The roan he bought at old Drysdale's sale. He broke out of the corral last night and Dave thinks he may have headed this way."

"Ah, yes, the homing instinct." The man picked up a pipe from the table and filled it. His fingers shook badly and it took him a long time. "You're not a Schultz, are you?"

"Oh, no," Neil said hastily. "I'm Neil Fraser. I live with my Uncle Matt Jardine."

"Mrs. Jardine's nephew, eh? Or is it grand-nephew? I've heard the old man talk about you."

Neil was shocked to hear his uncle referred to as old. He had never thought of him in that way, rather as a full-grown man who had never been young. But he was pleased that the owner of the shack had heard of him. He closed the door and took a step nearer the table. "Did you happen to see the horse?"

The man lit his pipe. "No. But then, I haven't been outside for quite some time. A touch of the 'flu, you know."

"Gee, that's too bad!" Neil's concern was genuine. The great 'flu epidemic of the early winter had touched the district lightly but the word was one charged with terror. He looked

around the single room which comprised the interior of the shack. It was frowsy and thick with dust, mostly ash from the big pot-bellied stove that stood in one corner. Dirty dishes were piled on the floor beside the stove, and the bunk along the far wall looked as if it had not been made up for weeks. "Listen," said Neil earnestly, "I'll hustle right back and tell some of the neighbours. Then they can come and give you a hand."

The man smiled. "I'm afraid I'm not in very good odour with the neighbours," he said. "Especially the women-folk. But don't worry. I'll pull through."

Then Neil knew who the owner of the shack was—Charlie Steele, the English remittance man, whose name had been linked with that of Helen Martell. He looked at Steele with reawakened interest. "Honest," he began, "you look pretty bad. If there's anything I can do—"

"No." Steele's voice was unexpectedly sharp. "You'd better run along now. I haven't seen Dave Schultz's horse. And I hope he never finds him. Schultz treats his horses worse than he does his wife. And that's saying something."

Neil, startled by the tone of the other's voice, flushed crimson and turned to go. As he did so he caught sight of the long rows of books that ran on either side of the door. Besides those on the shelves, there was a great stack heaped in one corner and reaching half-way to the ceiling. Neil hesitated, his hand on the door-knob. "You've got an awful lot of books, Mr. Steele," he blurted out.

Steele came around from behind the table and stood beside the boy. He was still swaying slightly and his breath was rank with whisky. "You like books?"

Neil nodded. He reached out and ran his finger lightly over the back of the volumes nearest him. "I like them," he said. "Only I don't seem to understand a lot of them very well—especially poetry books."

"Sit down, Neil." Steele pushed the boy into a near-by chair. He seemed suddenly excited. He went back behind the table, took a bottle from the cupboard and half-filled a glass. "You know, I've been wondering if I'd ever come across anyone in this God-forsaken wilderness who liked poetry. You're the first. What have you been reading?"

"Well," said Neil hesitantly, "I like things like 'The Isles of Greece' and 'Ulysses,' but, then, a lot of the stuff—"

He broke off, embarrassed to have to confess his confusion. Steele took a long drink and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Who helps you choose what you read?"

"No one, exactly. Miss Piggott, she gave me some books out of the school library, but I guess they were too hard."

"What were they?"

"Oh, *In Memoriam* and *Paradise Lost* and things like that."

Steele swore with unexpected ferocity. "Just what the dried-up old hag *would* choose," he shouted. "Here—have you read this—and this—and this!" He snatched the books from their shelves and piled them on the table so fast that Neil had time to read only a few of the titles—*Treasure Island*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *Marmion*, *King Solomon's Mines*, *The Jungle Book*, *Barrack-Room Ballads*.

"No," he said. "Not any of them." His voice trembled with excitement.

Steele swore again. "So she started you on *Paradise Lost*, did she? Read it, lad, read it! But not yet. Take these first. And when you've finished them, come and get more. I've plenty." He waved his hand toward the crowded shelves and hiccupped explosively. Then he burrowed into a dark pile of debris behind the stove and came up with a filthy sugar-sack. "Here, we'll stuff them into this," he said.

Neil took the bulging sack and tried to stammer out his thanks. But Steele had sunk into his chair behind the table and did not appear to be listening. His eyes were half-closed and he was muttering to himself. Neil tiptoed across the room and put more wood in the stove. "Good-bye, Mr. Steele," he said. "I hope your 'flu will soon be better."

Steele's hand shot out and caught the whisky bottle by the neck. "Unfortunately, a chronic condition," he said, enunciating his words with the utmost precision. "No known cure. But we must keep on trying. Hope springs eternal." And he poured himself another drink.

Neil rode home in a state of high excitement. But Aunt Em viewed his booty with grave displeasure. "Mark my words," she said, "you kin be sure that any books Charlie Steele gives

you won't be fit for a decent person to read. And, besides, Neil, there's lots of things you could be doin' to help your uncle and me without wearin' your eyes out over story-books and gettin' your head all stuffed up with a lot of nonsense."

But Neil, already deep in *Treasure Island*, did not hear her. In the succeeding weeks he made the acquaintance of Allan Quatermain and Mowgli and Marmion and Sherlock Holmes and a dozen other characters who were thereafter to be his friends for life. And from the two or three anthologies of verse that Steele had given him he learned by heart more poems than he had ever memorized in all his years at school. The world into which his own explorations had given him a confused glimpse was suddenly wide open to him, and life was richer than it had ever been before.

But he did not go back to Charlie Steele for any more books. A few days after his first meeting he rode for the weekly mail to the Pine Creek post office, run in her own home by the Widow Roebuck. There was the usual stack of papers, *The Grain Growers' Guide*, *The Free Press*, *The Family Herald* and, much more interesting than any of these, a new spring and summer mail-order catalogue. Neil was tying the papers together with a piece of binder-twine when Steele came in. The Englishman was wearing well-cut riding breeches and a heavy sheepskin coat. He did not speak to Neil, but began to thumb over the bundle of letters that Mrs. Roebuck handed him. He was clean-shaven now, and Neil thought he had never seen a handsomer man. Timidly he approached.

Steele did not look up. Neil coughed and spoke loudly to Mrs. Roebuck. But Steele was now absorbed in a letter. Neil took his courage in both hands. "Hello, Mr. Steele," he said.

Steele lifted his eyes and looked at Neil. There was no hint of recognition on his face. He nodded briefly and resumed his reading.

Neil turned away. He would not go back to see Steele again, but somehow he did not feel slighted. In a world filled with commonplaces, Charlie Steele was different. By his very remoteness he was on his way to becoming a god.

Chapter Five.

THAT YEAR spring came early. Almost overnight the snow disappeared from the crest of the hills and water poured down the coulées in muddy, swirling torrents. Early in April a faint tinge of delicate green hung like mist along the river banks, and on the uplands the crocuses were in bloom. On the farm, the bustle of activity was only slightly less than in the fall. Uncle Matt was up long before daylight "chorin' round," and out in the fields at break of day. He stopped work only as a concession to the weakness of horseflesh. He was obsessed now with the need of getting in as large a crop as his land permitted. "Prices can't stay up for ever," he explained to Neil. "Way I figger it, this is the last year to make a killin'. No more armies to feed—and them European countries will come back pretty quick." So he planted every available acre of ground to wheat, and postponed the much-needed summer-fallowing of certain of his fields for another year.

Most of the land in the Pine Creek district had been settled for at least a decade, but across the river new areas were opening up. For a month or more a thin stream of newcomers moved north over the ferry into the promised land. Most of them were soldier settlers being established on almost worthless farms under a grandiose government rehabilitation scheme, and nearly all doomed to years of struggle and disappointment. It was another year like the preceding, a year of feverish optimism, of determination to win from the land everything it had to offer while the rewards were worth while. No one spoke of staying in Pine Creek. "The Coast" was the goal of almost every family in the district. There, after he had made his pile, the farmer planned to retire to a balmy climate, trees that grew fruit in abundance, and pastures that never dried up. The

Promised Land lay just across the mountain ranges. But first there was a fortune to be made in Pine Creek.

People were restless, eager to be on the move. In the spring of 1919 no fewer than six families moved away from the immediate neighbourhood of Pine Creek. The Rheinharts and the Schultzes sold out for fabulous prices and moved back to the States, unmourned by any of their neighbours; the Svensons and the Petersons went to the Coast, and Joe MacNamara moved across the river, taking his twisted face from the sight of men. Others moved in to take the places of those who had gone, most of them returned veterans with a small stake to invest. Overnight the character of the community changed. The newcomers were for the most part hard, reckless men. Jim Lowery, who moved on to Vern Rheinhart's homestead, was said to have a jail record; Andy Michaelis lived on the Svenson place with a common-law wife; and the other newcomers, many of them Ukrainians, represented an element alien to a district hitherto predominantly Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian. Many of the new families were young couples without children, and attendance at school dwindled. More than ever Neil and Gil Reardon were drawn together. They were old-timers now, resenting the encroachment of newcomers whose ways were foreign to them and who were therefore to be scorned.

That spring Neil visited Gil in his own home. He went without asking Aunt Em. He was ostensibly out looking for cattle, and it was logical that he should drop in at the Reardons' and inquire if they had seen any animals bearing Uncle Matt's brand, the Circle K. The Reardons lived in a big rambling house on the bank of Pine Creek about a mile straight north of the school. Neil rode into the yard just at supper time and readily accepted Gil's urgent invitation to stay and eat. He stabled Jeff in the ramshackle log barn and accompanied Gil into the house.

Dan Reardon, Gil's father, was an immense man with black hair, black eyes, and a heavy black moustache. He welcomed Neil with bluff good humour, then paid no more attention to him. Mrs. Reardon was tall and slim; she moved with quiet dignity and held herself very straight, but her face, gentle, almost saint-like, was tired and drawn, and there were great dark circles under her faded blue eyes. She looked at Neil closely,

and patted him on the shoulder. "We're glad you've come at last, Neil," she said. "The other times you couldn't come, Gil was so disappointed."

Neil mumbled an embarrassed reply and went with Gil to the wash-shed adjoining the kitchen. After they had washed with uncommon care, Gil led Neil into the big living-room. A man and a woman were sitting on the couch, apart from each other, looking at magazines. Gil made the introductions with dignified formality. "Helen, I'd like you to meet my friend, Neil Fraser. And this is Cliff."

Helen Martell was as tall as her mother, but her face was still fresh and young. Her hair, black as midnight, formed a widow's peak over her high forehead. Her eyes were an amazing deep blue, almost violet. Neil thought that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Cliff Martell, back from the wars less than two weeks before, was a powerfully built, swarthy man with a hard chiselled profile. Neil did not like his eyes. They were small, almost colourless, and constantly shifting. Cliff acknowledged the introduction with a grunt, then returned to his paper. But Helen smiled and held out her hand. "So you're Neil," she said. "Gil always talks a lot about you."

At supper Helen sat across from Neil and, although he tried his best, he could not keep from looking at her. Whenever their eyes met she smiled, and he blushed to the roots of his hair. She was not like any other woman that he knew. Her skin was incredibly soft and white, her lips a rich crimson. Her hands fascinated him; they were long and white and her fingernails were filed to sharp points and shone as if they had been varnished.

There was more talk at the table than Neil had heard for a long time. Big Dan Reardon told stories and laughed often; his wife, seated at the foot of the table, discreetly echoed his laughter. Gil gave a detailed account of how he had saved himself from being thrown from his horse, when the cinch broke, by a superhuman feat of horsemanship. Helen, like her father, laughed easily and often. She kept up a flow of cheerful small talk about her latest trip to town, the new neighbours who had just moved onto the quarter adjoining the Martells', the new

Fords that had appeared in the district, and the dance that was to be held in the schoolhouse in two weeks' time. Only Cliff Martell and Neil were silent, Neil because of shyness, Cliff for reasons known only to himself. He sat beside his wife, his face inscrutable. All his interest seemed concentrated on the food before him, although he ate little. Only his flickering eyes betrayed an inward restlessness that had nothing to do with the immediate situation.

From that time on there were two great figures in Neil's life—Charlie Steele and Helen Martell. The people who surrounded the boy were for the most part of common clay—or so they seemed to him—undistinguished in appearance or accomplishment. The instinct of hero-worship, always strong in him, had lately been stimulated by his reading, which had peopled his imagination with a thousand strange and splendid creatures of romance. Now when he read of Arthur and his knights it was not surprising, perhaps, that all the knights looked very much alike—tall and slim under their armour, fair-haired and blue-eyed, with little fair moustaches,—and that the women of Arthurian romance were tall and dark and red-lipped, with slender white hands and pointed nails. When Guinevere and Launcelot rode together they looked for all the world like Helen Martell and Charlie Steele.

It was natural that Neil made no attempt to analyse his feelings towards either of his deities. It was enough for him that they existed; what they did was of little importance in comparison with the mere fact of their being. But he knew that his feelings towards Helen Martell were curious and unique. He dreamt of her often at night, and in his daydreams performed the most astonishing exploits on her behalf. His favourite dream was one occasioned by his recent introduction to the Zane Grey Western; he was out riding on Jeff along the bank of the creek; suddenly he saw coming towards him a herd of maddened cattle stampeding. In front of the herd rode Helen Martell, flying for her life. But her horse stumbled, crashed to earth. Helen shot forward over his head. She lay there for a moment, dazed, then feebly attempted to rise. The herd was almost upon her!

Neil did not hesitate. With a wild cry he hurled Jeff forward

in the path of the onrushing herd, leaned down, caught Helen up in a powerful grip, and rode away with the herd hard on his heels. He was drawing away rapidly when Jeff's foot went into a gopher-hole and the pony somersaulted over and over. Even so, Neil would have kept his seat had not the cinch broken. There was no hope of escape. With a muttered "so-long," he spread-eagled himself over Helen's prostrate body, and the herd swept over him. Although pounded by a thousand hoofs, he did not lose consciousness—the scene merely transferred itself to a hospital where Neil, from a vantage point near the ceiling, was able to observe himself stretched out on a bed, white-faced and swathed in bandages through which the blood showed in great round spots of red. Helen and Charlie were kneeling by the bedside and most of the Pine Creek community hovered respectfully in the background. "You saved her, Neil," Charlie Steele said, and choked suddenly.

Neil saw himself move ever so slightly and lift a hand so heavily swathed in bandages that only an occasional fingertip was visible. "That's all right, Charlie," he said, speaking with great difficulty. "Sorry if she—got—shaken up—shouldn't have—fallen—"

A gush of crimson flooded his lips and he turned his face to the wall. Helen bowed her head and the scene became a funeral procession in which the coffin was mounted on something that was a cross between a gun-carriage and a democrat, covered with a Union Jack and banked with flowers. And Helen Martell and Charlie Steele walked close behind with all of Pine Creek following after. There were, of course, numerous variations of the dream possible, but the basic pattern was always the same.

By the end of May the spring rush was over and all the crops in except late oats and greenfeed. Uncle Matt had sown two hundred acres of wheat and only twenty of oats. He had left no land at all for summer-fallow. Already the wrinkles of worry were deepening between his eyes. "Awful dry," he repeated over and over again, looking up at the serene blue overhead. "First time in five years we ain't had early rains."

The dust rose in great clouds off the fields and prairie trails and Aunt Em complained of the endless cleaning that the dust storms involved. "Seems like this old house is fuller of holes

than a colander," she said, "and the dust finds every one of them." But she no longer talked about a new house. She had stopped doing so years ago.

In spite of the ominously dry weather the prevailing spirit throughout the country was one of extravagant optimism. Talk of three and even four-dollar wheat was common. Europe was threatened with famine; Canada, the bread-basket of the world, would save the suffering millions on the Continent—at a price. Old Man Hunter's face was frozen into a perpetual grin of triumph. "Those countries over in Yurrip won't be in shape to prodooce for ten years yet. No efficiency—no guts. Ten years from now every man-jack of us'll have a car for every one in the family, and we'll even have a truck to bring the doggone cows home from pasture in." Old Man Hunter was over eighty; but it had not yet occurred to him that he was mortal.

School closed the last week in June. As usual, elaborate ceremonies were held to celebrate the event. Miss Piggott was an enthusiastic sponsor and director of entertainments, and made every festival the occasion of a concert to which the entire community was invited. In former years Miss Piggott had had a nucleus of competent performers around whom to build her programmes; Minnie Whittaker excelled as elocutionist and her "Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight" and "The Minister Comes to Tea" were items celebrated for ten miles round; little Olaf Svenson, in his last two years at Pine Creek, had developed a remarkable talent for imitating animal noises, and his reproduction of a cat-and-dog fight was always sure of at least three encores; Elsie Schultz had a sweet piping treble; accompanied by her sister, Velora, on the guitar, she sang affecting cowboy ballads concerned with the imminence of death and the grave. But of the three stars, only Minnie Whittaker remained, and Minnie had developed an artistic temperament and would recite only the poems of Alfred Lord Tennyson and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Miss Piggott, by virtue of her position, was forced to pay lip-service to Minnie's "taste," but she knew only too well what kind of reception a Pine Creek audience would accord even the most admirable rendering of "Come into the Garden, Maud," or "The Blessed Damozel."

Accordingly, after struggling for a week with the little group of recalcitrants who remained after school each day for rehearsal, Miss Piggott did what she had hitherto always carefully avoided doing—called upon adult talent for help.

The results were hardly what she had anticipated, even in her most apprehensive premonitory moments. After the opening chorus of welcome had been sung by the nine pupils of the school (Neil and Gil, red-faced and resolutely silent in the back row), young Johnny Watson, newly arrived on a soldier settler's farm near the river, sang "Mademoiselle from Armentieres" to his own banjo accompaniment. But the words were most emphatically not the same as those in the volume of patriotic songs that stood on the rack of the wheezy organ. The audience roared its approval and demanded an encore. Johnny, a lean freckled youth with an engaging grin and impish eye, obliged with a front-line version of "Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning." There were enthusiastic demands for another encore, but Miss Piggott, stern-faced and furious, promptly usurped the chairman's function and announced that the next item would be a recitation by Minnie Whittaker. Minnie's highly dramatic rendition of Tennyson's "I'm to be Queen of the May" was received with a polite spattering of applause, followed immediately by calls for Johnny Watson. The situation might have become difficult for Miss Piggott had not Johnny himself resolved it by reappearing with his banjo and singing "A Perfect Day," words by Carrie Jacobs Bond. Thereafter the programme proceeded without incident through the remaining numbers until "God Save the King" put an end to the community suffering.

After an interval for refreshments—coffee, made black and strong in a boiler, salmon and egg sandwiches, and a large variety of solid cakes and doughnuts—the desks were pushed back against the walls and the floor sprinkled with powdered wax in preparation for the dance. A few elderly people went home immediately after supper, but the number who remained was swelled three-fold by late arrivals who came from all directions, by "rig," by car and on horseback. When the orchestra—Mrs. Roebuck at the organ, Old Man Tracey with his violin, and Johnny Watson with his banjo—struck up the

first number, "K-K-Katie," the little schoolhouse was jammed with prospective dancers and spectators and the air was blue with tobacco smoke.

As a matter of course Neil and Gil stayed for the fun. They hung around the cloak-room to hear the conversation of the numerous stags and occasionally sauntered around the dance floor, addressing acquaintances of all ages familiarly, and exchanging sardonic remarks about the girls. Several times they went outside and amused themselves sidling past automobiles behind whose curtains they professed to see couples in intimate embrace. Once Gil, greatly daring, drew a flapping curtain aside and peered into the dark interior of the car. A savage oath exploded in his face and the boys fled.

"Gosh, Gil," Neil panted. "Who was it? What were they doin'?"

Gil shook his head. "It was kind of dark," he said. In the moonlight his face was white and there was a curious wild excitement in his eyes.

It was after midnight when Helen and Cliff Martell arrived. A fox-trot had just ended; most of the dancers had found seats along the wall, although a few couples were still chattering on the floor. When the Martells appeared at the door of the cloak-room a sudden silence fell. Helen seemed unconcerned, but Cliff was obviously ill at ease and angry. Then a woman's high-pitched, vacuous laugh broke the tension and the chattering noise of a hundred voices speaking at once rose in a confused hum.

Neil, sitting on the chair vacated by Johnny Watson, who had slipped outside for a drink, looked at Helen in awe. She had never seemed so beautiful. She was wearing a light-coloured dress of some soft material, cut so daringly short that it exposed her slim legs almost to the calf; and she had bound her hair with some kind of band that sparkled like diamonds. Neil heard Old Man Tracey whisper something to Mrs. Roebuck; he did not catch the words, but Mrs. Roebuck's reply was clear and shrill—"painted trollop!" Although he did not know what trollop meant, Neil was furiously angry. He got up and stalked away to join Gil, who had found some sandwiches behind a desk and was enjoying a second lunch.

The night wore on, and the spirit of the dance underwent a

subtle change. Nearly all of the older people went home shortly after midnight; those who remained were mostly the newcomers to Pine Creek with a sprinkling of inveterate dancers drawn from a much wider area. More and more couples disappeared outside, for longer and longer intervals; inside, the room was heavy with the mingled reek of tobacco smoke and bad whisky. Once, in the course of their prowling, Neil and Gil heard a half-smothered scream from inside one of the cars. They looked at each other, startled. Then Gil shook his head. "None of our business," he said. "I guess she's asked for it." They went back to the schoolhouse and passed Miss Piggott striding down the front steps. It was after two o'clock and she had done her best. All the members of the school board had gone home. Miss Piggott was going, too.

Charlie Steele arrived a few minutes later. He came in quietly and sat down in an empty chair near the two boys, well back from the edge of the dance floor. His face was white and there was the same look in his eyes that Neil had seen the first time he had met him. He was dressed with meticulous care; there was even a flower in the button-hole of his well-cut grey suit.

Helen Martell spoke to Steele as she danced past with Morris Langley. Cliff had receded into the background; he was no longer dancing but sat morose and preoccupied near the door of the cloak-room. Steele returned Helen's greeting with a smile and a nod. Hardly a word had passed between them, but the interchange was enough to renew the clacking of half the tongues in the room.

The dance ended. With only the briefest of pauses the orchestra struck up a Vienna waltz. Steele got up and crossed the room. Helen had left her partner and was sitting beside Cliff Martell. Steele spoke to her and they moved onto the dance floor. For fully a minute they were the only couple dancing. A slow, creeping red flushed the girl's pale cheeks, but Steele seemed unperturbed. And they danced the Vienna waltz as it had never been danced before in Pine Creek. A few other couples straggled onto the floor and once again the tension relaxed.

Cliff Martell got up from his chair and advanced to the edge

of the dance floor. His hair was tousled and there was an ugly flush on his face. Someone laid a restraining hand on his shoulder but he shook it off. As Helen and Charlie Steele whirled past him, he shouted out something that Neil could not hear. The couple stopped dancing and broke apart. Cliff lurched forward, swung savagely at Steele and missed. Steele hit him in the face and Cliff fell forward on the floor.

For a minute he did not move. Then Helen, her face deathly white, started towards the door. Steele hesitated, and looked down at the sprawling figure at his feet. Abruptly he turned and followed Helen. Cliff Martell got up slowly and shook himself. Helen and Charlie Steele were already outside. He looked into the faces of those who were gathered around him and his mouth twitched. "If there's trouble," he said, "you can't blame me." And he went out, closing the door very quietly.

A frenzied hubbub broke out behind him. A woman screamed hysterically, and several men answered from different parts of the room with meaningless catcalls. Mrs. Roebuck, sweeping the room with her small grey eyes that missed nothing, waddled to the organ and struck up "God Save the King." There were no protests, although it was only half-past two, and school dances usually lasted until at least four. Coats and wraps were quickly gathered together and the crowd, unexpectedly sobered, scattered into the grey dawn. Soon the schoolhouse was deserted except for Old Man Tracey, who in his capacity of janitor was half-heartedly attempting to sweep up the confused mass of papers, orange rinds, bread crusts and bottles that strewn the floor.

Neil and Gil walked part way home together. Neither spoke as they tramped across the fields to the cross-roads. At the cross-roads they lingered for a minute, watching the sun fleck the east with brilliant gold and purple light. Gil's face was white and strained, but when he spoke his voice was studiously casual. "Nice we can loaf now. Swim tomorrow?"

"Sure," said Neil. "Meet you right after dinner."

They separated and Neil ran all the way home. He did not know why, but he always felt lonely at daybreak. And, besides, there was a curious gnawing fear inside him that only four walls and food and human companionship could dispel.

Chapter Six

OLD MAN TRACEY brought the news at noon. He drove his rattle-trap Ford into the Jardine yard at breakneck speed, scattering chickens right and left, and came to a shuddering stop with one front wheel in Aunt Em's flower-bed. Neil was eating his dinner in the kitchen with Uncle Matt and Aunt Em, and Old Man Tracey began to shout at them through the screen door.

"Cliff Martell's dead! Charlie Steele shot him—right between the eyes!"

Old Man Tracey was wild with excitement and exalted by the pride that befits a bearer of great tidings. A thin stream of tobacco juice ran down the corner of his mouth and over his chin. He tore open the screen door and stumped into the kitchen.

Aunt Em and Uncle Matt were on their feet. For the first and only time in his life, Neil heard his uncle shocked into profanity.

"Goddlemighty!" he said, "Goddlemighty!" And he gripped the back of his chair with gnarled, whitening fingers.

Aunt Em screamed perfunctorily. Then she burst out—"I knew it—I knew it! All the time I knew that somethin' like this would happen!" Her response expressed the shocked satisfaction of the justified prophet.

"Happened this mornin'," Old Man Tracey babbled on. "Helen she came runnin' over to the Langleys' to tell them there'd been trouble but she didn't say how bad. The police is over there now—Sergeant Latimer and two constables. Charlie's on the run, but I don't figger he'll run far with them boys on his tail. Ever'body figgers he'll try to cross the river and hole up in the bush up north."

Neil had remained sitting in his chair. Old Man Tracey's

news had not been such a great shock after all. The presentiment of evil which had haunted him since leaving the dance had been confirmed. He only half-listened to what Old Man Tracey was saying—in his imagination he was with Charlie Steele, running for his life, on every side the police slowly closing in for the kill.

He got up and went quietly outside. For a time he wandered about the barn, talking to the horses, petting the two kittens that Gil Reardon had given him, and scattering straw in the stalls for unnecessary bedding. Old Man Tracey, having delivered his tidings, roared off through the flower-bed, across the yard and out through the gate, knocking down a gate-post in passing. Neil watched him disappear in a swirl of dust towards his next point of call, then went back to the house and began to split some wood. Presently Uncle Matt came out and went off to attend to one of the routine jobs with which he was eternally occupied. A minute or two later Aunt Em appeared. She was bursting with excitement and desperate for someone to talk to.

"I told you a long time ago, Neil," she said, standing with arms akimbo, "that Helen Martell was a bad woman. There's a streak in all them Reardons, so there is. If I was you, I wouldn't have any more to do with Gil than you have to. Though likely as not they'll all pull out of the country now on account of all the talk there's goin' to be."

Neil bit his lip and swung savagely at the block of wood at his feet. A splinter flew up and hit him in the face and he swore terrible oaths under his breath. Aunt Em rattled on. "I'm sort of sorry for Charlie Steele, though. Seemed like a right nice fellow for an Englishman, what little I saw of him. But when that woman got her hooks in him he never had a chance. It's an awful thing to think of a nice young fellow like him goin' to the gallus. His poor mother'll be heart-broken. Why, Neil, you're cryin'?"

Neil threw down his axe. "I am not," he said angrily. "A chip got in my eye. Guess I'll go inside and bathe it."

He went into the house, filled the basin with hot water from the reservoir, and made elaborate pretence of bathing the injured eye. Aunt Em made no comment and, what was more surprising, offered neither advice nor assistance. Instead, she busied



herself about the big stove. "Might as well make up a custard pie now that the hens are layin' so good," she said. "And I'll whip up a batter of cream puffs. Cream'll go sour if I don't use it up." Then she added, as if expressing a casual after-thought. "Maybe they won't catch Charlie Steele, after all. He's got a good head start and he's smart as a whip. Once he gets into the bush across the river I doubt they'll be able to lay a hand on him."

Neil dried his face and escaped outside. He took Jeff from the barn and rode at breakneck speed down to the creek, hoping that Gil would be there, yet dreading the meeting. But Gil did not come and Neil swam by himself. He plunged back and forth recklessly across the pool until he was exhausted, then lay panting face downwards on the bank while the hot sun beat upon his back. The lump in his throat seemed fixed there and from time to time, in spite of all that he could do, tears squeezed themselves out between his tightly closed eyelids. It was not what Charlie Steele had done that moved him so profoundly, although the deed was awe-inspiring in its very finality. It was not even the imminence of Steele's own death, but the probable manner of it that appalled him. The hero dead in battle or a fair fight was one thing—the hero choking his life out at the end of a rope was another. The sense of loss which Neil felt was all the greater because the kind of death that Steele must die would destroy both the man as he was, and the idol that Neil had dreamed him to be.

For two days the hunt continued. Sergeant Latimer and his two subordinates scoured the countryside without success. One of the constables, a slim youngster named Madden, stopped in at the Jardines' and asked a few perfunctory questions. He was sharp and self-assured and Neil hated him on sight. When Aunt Em asked him if Steele had any chance of escaping, his lips set in a thin line. "None at all," he said. "He'll swing." And he jerked his head in a manner horribly significant. Neil had long cherished the ambition to join the Mounted Police. Now the ambition died completely, and the sight of a redcoat awoke in him an unreasoning hatred.

The whole countryside was roused to a pitch of hysterical excitement. Steele had few friends or well-wishers other than Neil.

The Englishman had held himself aloof, he had been stuck-up; above all, he had refused to listen to the advice which his neighbours had so freely offered him. To most Pine Creek people Steele was a typical remittance man, green and debauched and unapproachable and contemptuous of public opinion. But though they loved Charlie Steele little, they had loved Cliff Martell less. Steele was never actively unpleasant; Cliff had been characteristically so. And besides, Helen Martell was the kind of woman that drove men mad. So it was that an undercurrent of sympathy for the outlaw spread throughout the district, because his vices were less positive than those of the man he had killed. Moreover, most people recoiled in horror from the thought of what would happen to Steele once the law caught up with him. Pine Creek, for all its petty excesses, was a law-abiding community, and the people of the district tended to view the crime not in terms of the immediate act but of its consequences to the doer. Like Neil, they were unable to stomach the picture of Charlie Steele with a rope around his neck.

So the police ran into a wall of cold, irrational hostility. No one had much good to say about Charlie Steele; none the less, it was impossible for the police to get a clear picture of what had happened at the dance. Johnny Watson, his eyes bland and innocent as always, assured Sergeant Latimer that Steele and Cliff Martell had left the dance-floor "laughin' fit to kill" because Cliff had tried to slap Charlie on the back and had fallen flat on his face he was so drunk. Mardie Langley hinted obscurely that Helen Martell had started everything, then said that nothing had happened anyway. At the end of twenty-four hours' investigation, Sergeant Latimer was in a foul temper; it was not improved when old Mrs. Roebuck told him that, if he and his hired help had done their job and cleaned out the moonshiners like they should have, they wouldn't have to be running after murderers. Then Sergeant Latimer said things, in the hearing of several Pine Creek citizens, that did himself and the law no good. The rumour of what he had called Mrs. Roebuck spread quickly; and soon Latimer and his constables were being viewed with suspicion and hostility by every member of the community. They, in fact, were held responsible for the tragedy. Steele and Martell had been drinking moonshine

whisky; the fact that they had been able to obtain it was clearly due to the criminal negligence of the police.

On the third day of the hunt Neil got on Jeff and rode north to the river. The view from the high bank was one which had always fascinated him, but this time he was drawn mainly by the desire to look across the river at the heavy bush country where the hunted man had almost certainly found refuge. Popular opinion inclined to the view that Steele had crossed the river on some kind of makeshift raft. Already police patrols were scouring the bush on the other side, and a close watch was being kept on sandbars, where the eddies might cast up a body.

Neil reached the bank after half an hour's ride and sat looking at the muddy yellow water that swirled far below. The river was dropping fast, and already grey mud-bars reached half-way to the other side. From the bank the two main channels of the river, twisting in and out among mud-bars and islands, were easily visible. And somewhere, in the tangled depths of bush on the other side, was Charlie Steele. Neil pictured him lying by day in the covert of a fallen log or a dense screen of underbrush and at night creeping out and driving steadily north, deeper and deeper into forest and muskeg, living off early Saskatoon berries and an occasional rabbit or prairie-chicken. But the picture, in spite of its dramatic possibilities, gave him no pleasure. He shook Jeff into motion and they slid down the steep bank into the heavy growth of willow and Saskatoon bushes that covered the narrow belt of flat land between the high bank and the water. Neil planned to ride out as far as he could on one of the mud-bars. It would be a novel and exciting experience to be out in the middle of the river with water on three sides of him.

He was half-way across the flats, lying low on the pony's neck to escape being slapped in the face by branches, when a man rose up from behind a clump of bushes and caught Jeff by the bridle. The pony snorted and backed away. "Whoa, Jeff," Neil shouted. Strangely, he felt no fear. Jeff came to a quivering standstill and Neil slid from his back to the ground.

Charlie Steele looked at the boy from bloodshot eyes. He had a revolver in his hand, but now he dropped it into his pocket. He was hatless, and his face was a mass of inflamed

scratches and mosquito bites. His shirt was in ribbons and there were streaks of dried blood across his chest. Neil was faintly shocked when articulate sounds came from between Steele's cracked and bleeding lips, so little resemblance was there between the haggard scarecrow in front of him and an ordinary human being. "Aren't you the lad who borrowed my books?"

Neil nodded jerkily. Charlie Steele squatted on his haunches and rolled a cigarette. There were only a few shreds of tobacco left in the bag which he pulled from his shirt pocket, and he was careful not to lose any. His hands were remarkably steady. "Why didn't you come back?"

Neil did not answer immediately. He looked away and cleared his throat. "I meant to," he said. "I meant to. But I never seemed to have time."

"Did you like the books?"

"They were great—just great! I read them all twice over and some of them, like *Treasure Island*, a lot more than that."

Steele lit his cigarette and inhaled deeply. "That's good," he said. "Very good. You'd like more?"

"You bet I would!"

For a moment a smile flickered across Steele's worn face. He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a pencil stub. "You haven't got a bit of paper handy?"

Neil had a little note-book in his hip pocket. He hardly ever wrote anything in it, but it seemed grown-up to own one. He brought it out and gave it to Steele. Steele opened the note-book and began to write. "I'm not sure about the legal phraseology," he said. "This is the first will I've ever made. But maybe they'll respect the spirit of it even if the letter isn't perfect."

He wrote rapidly for a minute. Then he stopped and looked up at Neil. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I've forgotten your name. I know you live with the Jardines."

"Neil—Neil Fraser."

Steele finished his writing. He tore out the page, folded it, and gave it to Neil with the note-book. "Show that to Sergeant Latimer. He ought to see that it's properly executed."

Neil slipped the paper into his overalls pocket. "Gosh, I'm

sorry, Mr. Steele," he stammered. Suddenly he could control himself no longer. He turned his head away and cried bitterly.

Steele straightened up and laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Everything's going to be all right soon," he said.

Neil lifted his head. "You figger you'll be able to get over?" His voice trembled with eagerness and excitement.

Steele looked across the river and shook his head. "No," he said, "I won't get over."

When he spoke again, there was unexpected anguish in his voice. "Neil, no matter what they tell you, it's hard to die. That's why I've waited so long. There are so many things I don't want to leave behind."

He broke off, and stared into space. Neil waited tensely. Steele threw the butt of his cigarette on the ground and crushed it with his heel. "Maybe if there was some other way of going, it would be easier. Death should come quietly—with dignity. There's something in Shakespeare that keeps coming back to me—something about the setting sun and music at the close. That's how it should be—music at the close. That's how I always thought it would be. Instead—"

Steele's voice died away. Neil shivered, tried to speak, but no words came. Steele shrugged his shoulders, and now there was the shadow of a smile on his face. "Of course, the mosquitoes make music of a sort, and after three days without grub I've got a whole orchestra in my head. But it's not very soothing."

Neil fought down the tide of anguish that threatened to engulf him. "Mr. Steele, I'll help you—I'll bring you grub."

Steele hesitated. Speculation flickered momentarily in his eyes. But he shook his head. "You'd better go now. Find Latimer. Tell him I'll be under this pine. And tell him I won't be any trouble."

He turned away and again looked out across the river. For a moment Neil waited. In his mind grandiose schemes were taking shape. He could bring Steele food by night—maybe find him a boat—carry messages between him and Helen—get him across the river somehow—lay false trails to deceive the police. But he did not speak. Steele seemed to have forgotten him.

Neil rode back across the flats, led Jeff up the bank, then

galloped wildly along the trail to the Pine Creek post office. He left Jeff untied in the yard and ran inside. Since it was not a mail-day, Mrs. Roebuck was alone. "Mrs. Roebuck," Neil gasped, "do you know where the police are?"

Mrs. Roebuck rocked placidly back and forth in her arm-chair. "No, and I don't care," she said. "What's the matter, Neil? You look like you just seen a ghost."

Neil blurted out his story. Mrs. Roebuck watched him closely. "Sure you *ain't* just seein' things?" she said when he had finished.

Neil nodded, too agitated to resent Mrs. Roebuck's insinuation. Mrs. Roebuck stirred in her chair. "Better git over to Johnny Watson's," she said. "Most likely he knows where the cops are. I figger myself that mebbe they got side-tracked into huntin' moonshine stills. They're prob'bly samplin' contents somewheres."

Neil rode at once to Johnny Watson's place. Johnny was at home, cleaning out the barn. He listened to Neil's story, a troubled expression on his freckled face. "That so?" he said. "We'd better be goin'. Latimer was snoopin' round here this mornin'. Said he'd most likely be over to the ferry this afternoon. I think he figgers Pete knows somethin'."

They got into Johnny's ramshackle Ford and roared along the winding trail that led to the ferry seven miles west. Johnny spoke only once. "We figgered he'd got across the river by this time." His voice was charged with bitter regret.

Sergeant Latimer was inside the ferry hut, talking to the ferryman, Pete Sorenson. Pete's face was sullen and there were tiny beads of sweat along his upper lip. Latimer listened to Neil's story, told stumbingly this time, for the boy was nervous. Latimer's eyes were coldly suspicious. "Nobody put you up to this?" he snapped.

"No, sir. Honest, it's all the truth. Look here." He fumbled in his pocket and brought out the note that Charlie Steele had scrawled. Latimer crumpled the paper between his fingers and thrust it into his pocket.

"All right," he said. "Come with me."

They drove back over the trail in Latimer's roadster. Johnny Watson followed close behind. At a farmhouse along the way

Latimer stopped long enough to pick up Lew Wentzel, a returned man living on a settlement grant. Presently Latimer turned off the main trail and followed an overgrown track that led to the top of the river bank. "Now, kid," he said, "show me."

Neil pointed, blinking back his tears as he did so. "He said he'd be waitin' under that big pine that's right in line with the sandbar."

For a long time Latimer looked through his binoculars in the direction that Neil had indicated. Then he turned to Wentzel. "I'm going down," he said. "If I need you I'll fire three times."

Wentzel nodded. "Don't you figger you'd better wait?" he said, in a troubled sort of way. "He's pretty sure to be dangerous."

Latimer did not bother to answer. He went down the bank stiffly, digging his heels into the soft earth, and vanished into the dense growth of bush on the flats.

Johnny Watson rolled a cigarette with fingers that shook perceptibly. "Figger there'll be any shootin'?"

"Could be," said Wentzel. "Not that Charlie Steele ever seemed like a killer, spite of what he done to Cliff Martell. But you take when a man's been without grub for three days and the mosquitoes after him, no tellin' what might happen."

Neil thought of Charlie Steele's ravaged face and shuddered. Then three shots rang out so quickly that there was scarcely a break between them. "O.K., kid," said Wentzel, sudden authority in his voice, "better beat it." He and Johnny slid down the bank and disappeared from sight at a stumbling trot.

Neil stayed on top of the bank. He felt physically sick and wanted to vomit. But he had no power to move from the spot where he stood, no power to stop looking at the pine tree where Charlie Steele had said he would be waiting.

He waited for a long time, and nothing happened. Perhaps Charlie had changed his mind—perhaps he had lured Latimer to the pine tree and miraculously escaped somewhere farther down the river. Perhaps he was already across and safe, for the time being at least, in the heavy bush on the other side. But then Neil saw the men coming and he knew that Charlie Steele had kept his word. Latimer led the way. Lew Wentzel and

Johnny Watson came close behind. They carried Charlie Steele between them and the body of the dead man sagged horribly as they struggled across the swampy ground.

Neil turned and fled across the prairie. An hour later, soaked with sweat, he reached Johnny Watson's yard. He untied Jeff and rode off at a hard gallop. He scarcely realized the direction in which he was riding until he found himself at the Reardons' door. He tumbled from Jeff's back, then, appalled at the rôle he had been about to play, hastily remounted.

The door of the kitchen opened and Gil came out. A smile of glad surprise lit up his face. "'Lo, Neil. Want to go swimmin'?"

Neil shook his head. Gil came closer. "Neil, what's the matter?"

Neil plucked at Jeff's mane. "Charlie," he said. "He's dead."

Gil did not say anything at first. He looked down at the ground and scuffed the dirt with his bare foot. "Helen's inside," he said, "I guess I'd better go tell her. Wait here."

He straightened his shoulders and went inside. Neil wiped the sweat from his forehead and tried to set his face in stern lines.

Gil and Helen came out together. The girl's face was white but there was no trace of emotion in her voice. "Tell me, Neil," she said.

Neil repeated his story. Helen listened quietly. "And that was all he said?"

Neil surprised a look of anguished anxiety in her eyes. For a wild moment he played with the idea of placing an appropriate last message in Charlie Steele's mouth—a message that would bring comfort to the woman who had loved him. He groped for words. "He said that—that—"

But the message would not take shape. Neil broke off. "No," he said dully, "I guess that was all."

He looked down at Helen and his heart was like lead within him, for he had failed both the dead and the living. He turned quickly and rode away so that Gil would not see his tears.

BOOK TWO

She Walks in Beauty



Chapter One

LONG AFTER THE EVENT, the death of Charlie Steele lived in Neil's memory with the vividness of a nightmare recalled immediately upon awakening. It stood out from the incidents composing the pattern of his life like a pillar rising from a great plain, dwarfing into insignificance everything that fell within reach of its shadow. And although Neil soon resumed his old pursuits with all of his former zest, deep within him there was a sense of something lost and irreplaceable—not Charlie Steele as he had really been in life, but the idealized conception that the boy had created for himself. And when Helen Martell went away, shortly after the tragedy, she took with her what had remained of the romantic and mysterious in Pine Creek.

The slow march of years brought no one to replace Neil's vanished idols, and because the instinct of hero-worship was strong within him, he was often troubled by vague, inexplicable longings. He still read a great deal, but the savour was not quite the same as it had once been. In the old days his imagination had identified the heroic and lovely creatures of fiction with Charlie Steele and Helen Martell, and now, tales of glorious deeds and lyrics of high romance too often served to evoke a picture that was never far from the surface of his consciousness—a picture of Charlie Steele sprawled in a huddled heap beneath the pine tree on the flats, his tortured, blood-smeared face upturned to the wide sky. He was seldom actually unhappy, but except when he was with Gil Reardon he was restless and sometimes moody. At school, Miss Piggott continued to preside with unimaginative inflexibility. Had she been gifted with a little more understanding, she might have helped Neil a great deal, but she dismissed him as difficult and a little bit queer. So it was natural that when Neil had completed Grade Nine,

the highest that Miss Piggott taught, he was glad to throw away his battered text-books and count himself henceforth among the free.

When Neil was sixteen, the routine of life in Pine Creek was suddenly disturbed. The long-promised branch railway, starting from the main line twenty-five miles south, was actually built. It passed through the territory lying east of Pine Creek, and almost overnight the town of Riverview sprang up at the big bend of the river, five miles from the Jardine farm. For a short time Riverview had all the gaudy glitter of a frontier town. Railroad and road construction crews were camped on its outskirts; and the one street swarmed with speculators and peddlers and small-time gamblers and scores of restless misfits who, having failed in an older society, found fleeting hope and reassurance in the new. Prohibition had gone out a short time before, and the two beer-parlours in town did a roaring trade. Drunken brawls were frequent, and after a serious shooting affray a mounted policeman was stationed in the town. At least two houses down by the river were shunned by all respectable members of the community. One night, when he was driving home from town in the democrat, Neil passed a girl who lived in one of the houses. She was a big-boned, powerfully built blonde, with bold dark eyes and flaming scarlet mouth. She stood on the high bank alongside the road, and the wind blew her skimpy skirts against her thighs. Her red-lipped smile stirred something in Neil's blood. He flushed and clucked nervously at the horses. When he had driven a little way, he looked back. The girl had come down from the bank and was standing in the middle of the road. She waved her hand, and her laughter was loud and shrill. Twice thereafter Neil saw her on the street; both times she smiled at him and her smile was friendly and disquieting. But after a while he saw that she smiled at everybody in much the same way and he experienced a feeling of vague regret. Then the two houses by the river were suddenly deserted and he never saw her again.

The closing of the brothels marked the end of Riverview's brief but gaudy adolescence. The frontier spirit died quickly and completely. Riverview took itself seriously; it was a town with a future and a mission, its mission being to surpass in size



all other towns on the branch line. A Chamber of Commerce was organized; there was talk of water-works, a hydro plant, a newspaper, paved streets, a flour mill, and industries which would make Riverview one of the great commercial centres of the West. But in the end, Riverview settled down quickly and without a struggle into its destined rôle, that of distributing centre for a sparsely settled rural community. Its single business street, hot and dusty in dry weather and a lake of mud in wet, ran straight as an arrow for two hundred yards and ended in a swamp. All the buildings on the street were frame, their false fronts creating a spurious effect of solidity. The Palace Hotel, All-White Help, stood on the corner opposite the station and did barely enough business, except in the beer-parlour, to justify its existence. The dwelling-houses of the Riverview citizens were built high above the street along the top of the river bank. Most of the houses were squat little bungalows, gaudy in fresh coats of paint. There were two Protestant churches in the town, and once a month the Roman Catholic priest from Red Hill held service in the schoolhouse.

Riverview was thus different in name only from a thousand other towns scattered throughout the West. For a fleeting hour it had brought glitter and excitement into the life of the territory it was meant to serve; now it was a dull, ugly street straggling along the river, and even the most optimistic booster knew in his heart that it would never be anything else.

On the farm, life went on almost unchanged. Neil had long since been elevated to the dignity of hired man, and Uncle Matt paid him going wages in the spring and fall, so that he usually had money to spend on books and other items in the mail-order catalogues that attracted his attention. He thought vaguely of saving his money and buying a quarter-section of land—the great land boom of the twenties was just beginning—but he was not really interested in farming. Not that he had plans for any other occupation. In his daydreams, which were as frequent and as real as ever, he lived many parts and wandered over the far places of the earth, meeting with strange and fantastic adventures that usually revolved around beautiful women in danger. But such dreams are the common property of imaginative adolescents; there was nothing in the reality of Neil's life to

suggest that any of them might some day be fulfilled. Since destiny is little more than a mystical term embracing the practical circumstances of environment and training, the pattern of Neil's future seemed clear enough. He would stay on the land; in due course he would inherit his uncle's farm; he would marry and have children; wax prosperous or suffer hardship; grow old and die. Only an extraordinary exercise of the will or some unlooked-for stroke of fortune could alter the pattern. But of all this, Neil, dreaming his dreams, knew nothing.

When he was seventeen, a new interest suddenly dominated his life. At school he had played baseball in desultory fashion, and after he left continued to do so whenever opportunity arose. But it was not until Johnny Watson organized the Pine Creek Wildcats that Neil took up the game seriously. In a single season he developed into a better-than-average pitcher. He was tall now, over six feet, with powerful shoulders, though his body was slim, and he was able to throw a ball with paralyzing speed. His control was poor and he found a curve ball almost impossible to handle, but he frequently terrified weak or inexperienced batters into swinging at balls that were nowhere near the plate. Gil Reardon caught, and Johnny Watson played first base, occasionally alternating with Neil in the pitcher's box. The other players were of indifferent calibre, but the Wildcats were easily the best of the rural teams around Riverview.

At the beginning of their second season, the Wildcats won for themselves something more than a local reputation. Greatly daring, they entered the big twenty-fourth of May tournament in Riverview. The draw had been arranged by the Riverview committee to give the home team as easy a time as possible, and the Wildcats met Riverview in the first round. But for once Neil had his blazing fast ball under control, and he mowed the rival batters down like corn-stalks. Early in the game Gil Reardon doubled with the bases full and Pine Creek coasted to an easy six-to-one victory. The beaten Riverview players promptly retired to the beer-parlour of the Palace Hotel, where they remained for the rest of the day, reappearing at brief intervals to bemoan their luck and offer to their disgusted supporters slightly befuddled explanations of what had happened. Pine Creek went on to win over Gibson's Landing and succumbed

honourably in the final game to the powerful Red Hill team from fifty miles south.

For the rest of the summer Neil and Gil lived baseball. They played at least once a week for the Wildcats and occasionally ranged farther afield, playing in tournaments up and down the line for perhaps a guaranteed ten dollars and expenses, with the assurance of an additional ten or fifteen dollars in the event of victory. Neil loved the tournament atmosphere. He glowed with pride when small boys pointed him out and when girls whom he had never met called him familiarly by his first name. He tried to appear unconscious of his notoriety, and in victory or defeat did his best to assume an expression of complete impassivity. Actually, every game he played was a succession of wild emotional crises. He raged inwardly when his support faltered, suppressed with difficulty an exultant war-whoop when a batter missed a third strike, and felt a thrill of sheer ecstatic delight whenever he himself connected solidly for a long hit. At times, under pressure, he blew up completely, and all Gil's exhortations to forget about the corners and put 'em in the groove would be in vain. Gil, unlike Neil, never made any attempt to conceal his feelings. He was an admirable catcher and a shrewd judge of a batter's weaknesses. Throughout a game he kept up a constant chatter of encouragement to the infield and, no matter what the score, kept a stout heart to the end. At bat he was deliberate and dangerous. Neil and Johnny Watson had higher batting averages, but it was Gil who drove in the most runs. In a tight situation he was easily the most formidable man on the team.

After the short-lived excitement of the summer season, Neil found winter long and dreary. He had learned to skate, but he was not good enough to play hockey with the Riverview team and skating in itself did not interest him very much. He had long since given up trapping, and although he and Gil still roamed the bluffs and coulées with their .22's, game had become very scarce. Nor was life at home any more exciting than in the past. In spite of a succession of fairly good crops, Uncle Matt made no improvements in the house. He and Aunt Em still went to bed immediately after supper and Neil spent the evenings alone in the dark, smoke-stained kitchen, poring over his books.

Lately he had begun to range over wider fields of both poetry and prose. Byron continued to delight him, but he had tired of Tennyson. For a time his god was Swinburne and he learnt by heart all of "The Garden of Proserpine" and "The Hounds of Spring." But Conrad's *Youth* gave him a greater thrill than anything he had read since, "Ulysses." The gorgeously ornate passage describing Marlow's first glimpse of the mysterious East moved Neil to sheer ecstasy. Here the stuff of his dreams took coherent shape. In the first flush of excitement he bought every Conrad that he could find listed in the mail-order catalogues. But he found *Lord Jim* and *Nostramo* difficult and at times incomprehensible. So he returned again and again to *Youth* until he could repeat whole passages from memory.

During the winter there were many dances and socials in Pine Creek and Riverview that he might have attended. But he was shy and diffident with girls, and he had never mustered up sufficient courage to learn to dance. He tried to cover up his diffidence by an assumption of world-weary contempt of girls and adopted as his motto a line from Kipling to the effect that he travels the fastest who travels alone. But Gil Reardon refused to treat Neil's profession of misogyny seriously. "Sure you like 'em," he said, with a knowing grin. "You like them so much that you're scared. Why don't you relax and have fun? They'll meef you about nine-tenths of the way. Sue McCaffrey was asking me yesterday why you never went to any of the Riverview dances. She's got a crush on you—like all the other dames in town."

Neil flushed with pleasure and excitement. But he shook his head. "You got me wrong, Gil," he said. "All wrong. Honest, they don't interest me in the least."

Then Gil offered an obscene explanation of Neil's lack of interest, and Neil flared up angrily. But Gil quickly healed the breach. "Keep your shirt on, Neil," he said equably. "I'm just trying to kid you into having a good time. We could have a swell foursome—you and me and a couple of town babes who know what it's all about. No foolin', you could go as far as you liked with any dame in Riverview. That's how nuts they are about you."

Neil answered Gil shortly. All the same, he was pleased.

Even though one were committed to a way of life that barred the soft white hand from the bridle rein, it was good to be noticed and wanted.

In the spring of 1927 Neil came of age. Uncle Matt honoured the occasion by giving Neil a quarter share in the future proceeds of the farm. Neil was pleased but not greatly excited. On nearly every farm money served two purposes only—to replace worn-out equipment or buy more land. No amount of money seemed to make much difference to the way of life. Without realizing it, Neil had grown into the attitude of mind characteristic of the average farmer in the district. The logical thing to do with his money was to make a down payment on a quarter of his own. There were still some quarters of C.P.R. land available straight north along the river. The soil was sandy but the pasture was good and the price of fifteen dollars an acre with twenty years to pay seemed reasonable. He could get a few acres broken each year and in a short time the land would pay for itself.

There were other possibilities, more nebulous, more attractive. He might make a trip to the city, perhaps that very fall, along with Gil Reardon, who had been there several times before and had come back with many strange stories to tell. He might get a radio for his own room so that he could listen to his favourite programmes after he had gone to bed. He would, of course, buy lots of books and he might even try to pick up a second-hand roadster. He had no interest in machinery or engines but he wanted to be independent of Uncle Matt's 1920 Ford.

The summer passed quickly. Crops were fair, although a hail-storm early in July did some damage. Neil played baseball two or three times a week, pitched no-hit games in two successive tournaments, and began to dream of a career in the big leagues. But in the last tournament of the season, at the Red Hill fair, he blew up completely in the fourth innings of a tense final, walked five men in a row, and retired ignominiously in favour of Johnny Watson. Playing first base, he let a grounder go between his legs and two runs scored. When he finally stalked in, his face flushed with anger and embarrassment, he found Joe Bullock waiting for him. Joe was the ace pitcher of the Riverview team, defeated in the first round of the tournament.

He had spent the afternoon in the beer-parlour and was barely able to stand upright. "Tough goin', old man, tough goin'," he sympathized, throwing his arm about Neil's shoulder and blowing whiffs of beer-soaked breath into his face. "Like I always said—a million-dollar arm an' a ten-cent brain. Too bad—too bad!"

Neil shook Joe off and, stepping to the plate, took three savage swings at the first three pitches and returned to the bench. At the end of the game the score stood fifteen-to-nothing in favour of Red Hill, and Neil's dream of emulating Dazzy Vance was over.

He was sore and moody all the next day, and scornful of Aunt Em's clumsy attempts to comfort him. "First game you lost all year, Neil," she said for the tenth time. "You can't *always* win. If you did, nobody'd have any fun."

Neil did not bother to reply. Aunt Em looked at him doubtfully and changed the subject. "You goin' to the social tonight?"

Neil shook his head. "Not likely."

"I sort of had a feelin' I'd like to go myself," said Aunt Em. "Seems like I haven't been anywhere in ages. But, of course, Matt hasn't gone to doin's like that since the first year we came west." She sighed, and there was a wistful look in her eyes. "Seems like you're takin' after him, Neil, even though you're not the same blood."

"I'm sorry, Aunt," said Neil quickly. "It just hadn't occurred to me that you'd be interested. Of course I'll take you if you'd really like to go."

After supper he hurried through his few chores and got ready for the social. He spent a good deal of time over his toilet. He had already heard from Gil Reardon that the new teacher, in whose honour the social was being held, was young and a swell looker, and he could not repress a tingle of anticipation as he looked at his reflection in the cracked dresser mirror. He was over six feet tall now, with straight fair hair bleached almost white by the sun. His features were regular, his smooth brown skin free from any of the blemishes which are the frequent inheritance of adolescence. He carried himself well, but his brown suit which he had bought through a mail-order catalogue

fitted badly across the shoulders and the sleeves were too short. He was terrified of appearing conspicuously dressed, and his tie and socks were a drab brown like the suit. His clothes were those of a man many years his senior, and he wore them uncomfortably. He was at home only in overalls or baggy, sweat-stained baseball uniform.

Aunt Em, delighted at the prospect of an evening's gossip with neighbours whom she rarely saw, chatted incessantly as they drove along the newly graded municipal road to the Pine Creek school. "They say the new teacher's awful pretty, but Mrs. Langley's afraid she's fast. Says she wears her skirt clear to her knees and uses paint. But I guess you young men won't mind." And Aunt Em chuckled heavily.

"A change from Miss Piggott, anyway," said Neil. "But I'm not interested, Aunt. You know that."

"Them that hold out the longest always fall the hardest," said Aunt Em sagely. "But I hope that when you do go lookin' for a wife, Neil, you'll get somebody that can cook and keep house real well. Paint wears off, I always say, but if a girl can cook you won't find her man complainin' much."

Neil smiled to himself in the darkness. Women occupied a large part of his dreams, but he had never considered culinary skill as one of their important attributes. It was, in fact, impossible to associate any of his heroines with mundane things like food and household chores. If he married at all, which seemed unlikely, his mate would be a woman cast in the mould of Helen Martell—someone tall and dark and remote and beautiful, and their life would be one of alternate fleshly passion and artistic achievement. Neil thought a good deal now of himself in the rôle of author—a successful novelist, preferably, because novel writing paid well. But from time to time he would publish a slim volume of poems, and his poems would probably be his most significant contribution to posterity. Of late he had been scribbling verses in the privacy of his room, and in his desk there was a scribbler half full of sonnets and odes, all of them incomplete. His wife might be an artist, too, although in a less important sphere than literature. She would perhaps be a singer, who would give up her career in order to be with Neil. At other times he rejected utterly the

idea of marriage; for a great writer a mistress—or perhaps a succession of them—all dark and dreamy-eyed and beautiful, with smooth white bodies and long, lovely legs, seemed more appropriate and daring. Haunted by such visions of beauty and delight, it was impossible that he would find much to interest him in a little country school teacher, even if she were a swell looker.

Half a mile from school a tire blew out. Cursing silently, Neil made the necessary repairs. He had no spare on the car, so he had to take the tire off and patch the tube. They were late reaching the school and, in order to avoid making a conspicuous entrance, Neil remained outside to brush the dirt off his clothes and smoke a soothing cigarette. Smoking was a newly acquired habit; he indulged in it, not because of any physical need, but because it stamped him a sophisticated man of the world.

When at last he went inside, the programme arranged by the school board, under the chairmanship of Morris Langley, was under way. Johnny Watson was singing "It ain't a-gonna rain no mo'," with appropriate references to local celebrities. With the passing of the years Johnny had aged a good deal in appearance; he was married now and the father of four youngsters, any one of them, so he averred, full enough of the devil to drive a man nuts in a week. But his spirit was as ebullient as ever. His verses, full of crude innuendo, were sung with tremendous gusto and great innocence of expression. Neil reached the door of the cloak-room just in time to hear his own name:

Oh, Neil's a mighty pitcher,
The handsome son-of-a-gun!
But he lost his hair at the Red Hill fair—
The score was fifteen-none!

And the audience roared out the chorus—

Oh, it ain't a-gonna rain no mo', no mo'—
It ain't a-gonna rain no mo'.
How in the heck can you wash your neck
If it ain't a-gonna rain no mo'.

Neil grinned sheepishly at the men standing around him. "Tough luck, old man," Lew Wentzel commiserated. "But you can't win all the time. Been a great year."

Someone clapped him on the shoulder. It was Gil Reardon. Neil smiled without speaking. Time had strengthened immeasurably the bond between the two. They were inseparable companions who had reached the advanced stage of understanding where neither felt any compulsion to talk in the other's presence. Gil was as tall as Neil and more heavily built. He was handsome in a dark, brooding way which Neil sought vainly to imitate. He dressed well, in clothes made to measure in the city, and he affected a more daring taste in shirts and ties than anyone else in Pine Creek. "Hello, old-timer," he said. "So you couldn't stay away?"

Neil shook his head. "Had to come to look after you, Gil," he said. "Hey—listen—"

From the front of the room Johnny Watson's voice rose high and clear—

Oh, Gil is Pine Creek's heart-throb—

A mighty sheik is he!

But there ain't no gal can satisfy Gil,

So he takes them three by three!

Gil smiled with just the right degree of indifference, and replied without embarrassment to the laboured witticisms of the men around him. Then he poked Neil in the ribs. "Seen her yet?"

"Not yet. Can't say I've been stretching my neck any."

"No? Well, you will. She's all right."

In spite of his outward show of scepticism, Neil was impressed. Gil had the reputation of being a connoisseur of women. But he affected disdain. "Come on outside," he said. "The kids are going to take over now. Let's have a smoke."

They went outside and sat in Gil's roadster. For a time they smoked in silence. Presently Gil pulled a small flask out of his breast pocket and offered it to Neil. "Have a slug?"

Neil shook his head. "Thanks, not now," he said. He had never tasted alcohol in his life. He knew that Gil took an occasional glass of beer, but the flask was new and startling. He tried hard to conceal his surprise. "The old lady would be upset," he explained. "You know how it is."

"Sure." Gil nodded comprehendingly. He took a short drink

and restored the flask to his pocket. "Maybe it would be a good thing if someone got upset over *me*. But the old man has enough trouble looking after himself, I guess. Three sheets in the wind most of the time, and now with Mother the way she is, he's hitting the bottle harder than ever."

"Tough, all right," said Neil. Then he asked diffidently, "How's your mother feeling now?"

"No better." Gil spoke tonelessly. "She's been wanting to see the priest, but Dad won't let her."

The Reardons were nominally Catholics, but for years no member of the family had attended church and it was common gossip that Dan Reardon was an atheist. Neil had never discussed religion with Gil. It had always been tacitly understood that the subject was taboo, and until tonight Gil had never made even an indirect reference to his faith. Now he struck the steering-wheel with clenched fist. "It's O.K. not to believe in anything so long as things are going all right. But now—"

He broke off abruptly. "Of course," he concluded, in a more natural voice, "the old man's right. The priests are nothing but money-grubbers who try to scare you into coughing up your last nickel for the church. But I guess Mother would sleep more at night if she had her way."

He took another drink from the flask—a longer one this time. "Neil," he said, "I'm clearing out."

Neil was startled. "Gil, you're kidding."

"I was never more serious in my life. I'm sick of the farm. As far as I'm concerned, it stinks. Me for the bright lights."

"What's got into you, anyway, Gil? Most of the time you talk as if the farm was the only life, and I'm on the other side of the fence."

"Sure," Gil nodded. "I've been trying for a long time now to talk myself into liking it. Ever since Helen cleared out, I guess. But honest to God, Neil, I hate the farm!" Then he added, with an intensity of bitterness in his voice that shocked Neil, "Look what it's done to Mother!"

Neil did not know what to say. He dug into his pocket and brought out a package of cigarettes. Gil took one, lit it and smoked savagely. "She isn't much over fifty," he went on, "but she's been old ever since I can remember. From the time she

left the city with Dad she's never had a day's fun—just hard work all day and every day, year in and year out. Sure, I know we got good furniture, but it was Helen who got it. She could handle the old man because she gave him his own hell back with interest. But Mother's different. She never was a fighter. And now she's dying. And the most terrible thing is that she's glad."

He turned to Neil and his face was white. "Just think of it, Neil—glad to die—glad to be through with everything. And it's not because she's looking forward to a heaven where she's going to have a good time through all eternity—it's just that she's so tired she can't think of anything she wants so much as a long, long rest. It's a tough way to finish. Death shouldn't be like that for anybody. Least of all for Mother."

From somewhere in the recesses of Neil's memory words began to echo like bells, singly at first, then falling into order until at last they shaped themselves into coherent utterance. "The setting sun—and music at the close," he said, half to himself. "That's the way it should be."

"I guess so," said Gil doubtfully. He switched on the overhead light and straightened his tie in the rear-view mirror. "Anyway, from now on just watch my dust. I'm going to get everything that's to be got out of life while the getting's good. And anyone'll tell you that a farm is a poor place to sow wild oats."

They got out of the car. The conversation had shocked Neil immeasurably. But he affected nonchalance. "Shucks, Gil," he said, "you'll get over it." Then he added shrewdly. "You're the kind of guy that's got to believe in something besides raising Cain all the time."

Gil was silent. "Maybe you're right," he said at last. "Come on, let's go inside."

Chapter Two

WHEN NEIL AND GIL returned to the schoolroom the programme was over and the first fox-trot of the evening under way. Time had made changes in the orchestra. Johnny Watson was in his old place with banjo and guitars, but Mrs. Roebuck, too rheumatic to get about any longer, had yielded her place at the organ to one of Lew Wentzel's girls. Roy Hillaby from across the river played the sax, and Bert Vokes, the curly-headed machine agent from Riverview, had come out to lend a hand with his traps. Playing at country dances was good for business. But the spirit of the crowd had changed very little over the years. There was the same group of elderly Pine Creek matrons in one corner, the same crush of gawking stags around the cloak-room door. It was a noisy party and already some of the younger men were moving with unsteady gait. But the prevailing spirit was one of good humour and good will. The entire community was on hand to make the new teacher feel at home and to look her over from head to foot.

Gil and Neil worked their way through the crowd of stags until they had reached the edge of the floor. Gil looked around quickly. "There she is!"

"Where?" said Neil. He spoke eagerly, in spite of himself.

"The red-head in the green dress, dancing with Doug Thatcher."

Neil saw a tall red-headed girl dancing with the bank teller from Riverview. She wore very high heels, which made her seem taller than she really was, and her legs were slim and lovely. But there was time for only a fleeting glimpse before the girl and her partner were lost in the shifting maze of the dance. Neil turned away, affecting indifference. "Hardly my type. Can't say I see anything to shout about."

"Wait till you get a close-up," said Gil. "So long, Neil. Duty calls."

He claimed for his partner a bold-faced, sloe-eyed girl in a tight black dress, whom Neil did not know, and joined the throng on the floor. Gil danced well, and for an unguarded moment Neil envied him in every fibre of his being. Then he remembered the rôle that he had deliberately chosen; he, Neil Fraser, was the lone wolf and women did not figure in the pattern of his life. He found an empty chair in a corner, sat down, and assumed an expression of what he hoped was brooding intensity.

But all the time he was acutely conscious of everything that was going on around him. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw Minnie Whittaker cast languishing glances in his direction. Minnie, he told himself condescendingly, had improved a good deal lately. She had long since got rid of her dramatic pretensions and her adenoids; and a year in the city, where she had completed high school, had done wonders for her appearance. But Neil was not much interested. Minnie was old and familiar stuff. He admired her legs in a desultory sort of way and thereafter ignored her. He saw the school teacher, her red hair gleaming in the light of the big gas lamp suspended from the ceiling, dancing every dance, nearly half of them with Gil Reardon. Gil had apparently established pre-emptive rights without effort. Again Neil sinned in envy when he saw the sophisticated way in which Gil carried on a light-hearted conversation with the teacher between dances. Neil himself had no small talk, no line. When he tried to cultivate one he always sounded stilted and smart-alecky. But with Gil it was different. From the look on the teacher's upturned face Neil knew that she was interested and pleased.

The orchestra crashed out a final chord, and there was a moment of silence during which Neil heard Aunt Em announcing that she always fried hers in lard. After a perfunctory scattering of applause and a few calls of encore, the dancers drifted away to odd corners of the room or outside. Neil remained in his chair, staring off into space. He had suddenly become endowed with marvellous skill in dancing. He rose to his feet and with the easy insouciance that stamped him as a man of the world—

walked negligently to the end of the room and asked the pretty girl in the bright red dress to dance. Her name was Marjorie Cairns and she worked in the Riverview Drug Store. She was one of the most popular girls in town, reputedly "fast," and Neil had often admired her from a distance.

She looked up quickly; unconcealed pleasure sparkled in her eyes. "Why, Neil, I didn't know you danced?"

"I don't—as a rule. But there are temptations which no sensible man attempts to resist."

They laughed together and he led her onto the floor. The orchestra was playing a waltz and they were the only couple dancing. The girl clung closely to him, and their bodies moved as one. He heard murmurs of admiration from all parts of the room, and the girl whispered in his ear, "Neil, you're marvellous—simply marvellous! I never dreamed that dancing could be like this!"

Neil smiled—a cynical, worldly smile. They all said the same thing, responded in the same way. He tightened the hold of his arm around the girl's waist and she pressed her body hard against his. Then suddenly he stopped in the middle of a bar. She looked at him reproachfully and gave a shuddering sigh. "Oh, Neil, what's wrong? I was having such a swell time!"

"We're going outside," he said.

The reproachful look vanished from her eyes. She asked no questions as she accompanied him through the cloak-room and out into the night. He led her to his car—no longer a 1920 Ford but a long, sleek Buick roadster—and opened the door. "Get in," he said. The girl obeyed eagerly. He got in beside her, slid an arm around her waist and crushed her red lips savagely against his own. He was brutal in a sophisticated way. The girl moaned slightly. Her eyes were closed now, her breast heaving, her body tense with desire. "Oh, Neil," she cried, "Oh, Neil—you mustn't—" But every movement of her body was a contradiction of her words.

Neil laughed harshly. He drew his arm away, straightened up and stepped on the starter. The girl clung to him, half-sobbing. "Neil, where are you going?"

"I'm taking you home," he said. "A girl like you shouldn't be out after nine o'clock."

He drove expertly with one hand while he fished a cigarette from the package in his pocket and lit it. "Trouble is, Marjorie, you get excited. You can't hang on to yourself. A man doesn't get any kick out of what's handed him on a platter. He likes to do some work for his thrills. After this—"

Someone touched Neil on the shoulder. He sat up, startled. Gil Reardon was smiling down at him. "Snap out of it, Neil," he said. "Moira wants to meet you. Moira, this is Neil Fraser. Neil—Moira Glenn."

Neil got awkwardly to his feet. His face was red and there were tiny beads of sweat along his upper lip. "Pleased to meet you," he mumbled and was at once aware that he had said the wrong thing. He should have said, "How do you do?" simply, but in such a way as to imply and create interest. Miss Glenn said something, he wasn't sure what, and sat down in a vacant chair beside him. Gil murmured an excuse and went off somewhere. Neil had a feeling of trapped helplessness as he sat down beside the teacher.

Miss Glenn looked at him curiously. "I've been watching you, Mr. Fraser. Do you really like sitting on the sidelines all by yourself and looking sardonic, or is it just a habit?"

Neil crossed his legs, uncrossed them, then thrust them straight out in front of him, almost tripping a passer-by. He could feel the sweat breaking out on his forehead now, and cursed his gaucherie. "Oh, I don't know. I guess I like it all right."

The girl laughed uncertainly. "I'm sorry. I'll go away if you like."

Neil had a moment of sudden panic. "No, I don't mean that," he stumbled. "I don't want you to feel—Please don't go away."

"Are you just being polite?"

"No, I'm not—honestly, I'm not." The sincerity in his voice was unmistakable.

Miss Glenn laughed again. This time her laughter was pleasant and assured. "I've been wanting to meet you, Mr. Fraser, ever since I came to Pine Creek—ten days ago. You may not know it, but you're quite the local hero."

"Yeah?" Neil felt a warm glow deep inside. "People round here figure that if a fellow's a good ball-player he really amounts to something."

"And you don't think so?"

For the first time Neil lifted his eyes and looked directly at the teacher. Her eyes, like her dress, were green, or perhaps the light made them seem that way. Her lashes were long and curled up at the ends, her eyebrows slim and arched. There was a sprinkling of tiny freckles across her nose, and her mouth was full and very red. She was smiling at him, and her smile was warm and ingenuous and somehow disturbing. Unexpectedly he felt the urge to talk.

"No," he said, "I don't. Baseball's all right. I used to think I'd like to be a big leaguer. But it's a game and there's a lot more to life than games. In the long run, they don't matter much. Way I figure it—"

He broke off, not because of sudden shyness, but because he had nothing more to say. He dropped his eyes. Miss Glenn waited. "Well," he went on presently, "I guess I haven't figured out anything. I don't know what I do want. But baseball's not enough."

"Is that because you lost fifteen-to-nothing at the fair yesterday?" said Miss Glenn unkindly.

Neil flushed. "No, it isn't." He was suddenly angry and he almost shouted his denial.

"I'm sorry, Neil," she said. The casual use of his first name soothed his anger and he looked at her again. Gil was right; the teacher had class.

"I wasn't really interested because you were a good ball-player," Moira went on. "After all, Babe Ruth's a good ball-player but I wouldn't much look forward to spending an evening with him. But I heard other things about you."

"Shucks," said Neil. He scuffed the floor happily with his foot.

"Mrs. Langley says you spend a fortune on books. She thinks you're queer that way. She always calls you 'poor Neil'." Moira laughed in a way suggesting pity and contempt for Mrs. Langley.

Neil laughed, too. "I read quite a lot," he admitted. "Not much else to do in the winter-time."

"What do you read?"

"Almost anything. Some of the old-timers like Byron and Swinburne—and Wells and Conrad and De la Mare and Rupert Brooke—"

"Proud we were,
And laughed, that had such brave true things to say.
And then you suddenly cried, and turned away."

Neil's eyes widened. It had never occurred to him that anyone besides himself read poetry and enjoyed it. He looked at Moira in astonished delight. Then, very red in the face, he made the plunge. "Look here, Miss Glenn, there aren't many books in the school library worth reading, and I know the Langleys haven't any at all unless you count Eaton's catalogue. I'll lend you some if you like."

He liked the quick flash of laughter that lit up her face. "And you'll bring them yourself?" she said.

"Sure. That's what I meant."

He knew that he had missed the opportunity of a subtle witticism. Probably he would think of a suitable reply next week. But Moira's smile was warm and personal. "I'll be wanting a lot of books then."

The orchestra blared out the music of the latest fox-trot. Three young men converged on Miss Glenn. There was a brief, good-natured verbal battle, and Doug. Thatcher bore the teacher off in triumph. "So long, Neil," she called over Thatcher's shoulder. "Why don't you learn to dance?"

Neil grinned at her sheepishly. It seemed a major crime not to know-how to dance. Maybe, he thought, as he followed her red head with hungry eyes, he could learn in his room to the music of the radio. Then, at the next dance—

Gil Reardon dropped into the chair beside him. "Well?" he challenged. There was an amused glint in his black eyes.

Neil lit a cigarette and flicked the match-stick under his chair. "Not bad. If I were you, I'd stick with her."

Gil laughed. "Not me. She's got ideals."

Neil made a gesture of impatience. An hour ago he had

found Gil's newly proclaimed hedonism exciting. Now it annoyed him. "Why don't you quit posing, Gil?" he demanded. "You know darned well you've got ideals yourself."

Gil slapped him on the shoulder. "Maybe you're right, Neil," he said. "But as far as Moira's concerned, the field is wide open."

He got up and sauntered off toward the cloak-room. Neil started after him, changed his mind and sat down again. He wanted to be alone. He waited a few minutes, then went outside. It was a brilliant starlit night. He walked quickly past the cars parked in the school-yard and down the path leading to the creek. He wanted to get as far away as he could from human contact. But someone was giggling in the grove of poplars down by the creek, and Neil turned back in disgust. It seemed impossible to find an atmosphere appropriate to his mood. Presently he went back to the schoolhouse and waited impatiently until Aunt Em was ready to go home.

He did not speak again to Moira Glenn. Oddly enough, he did not really want to. He wished first of all to digest the great experience that had been his, to recall the way she had looked, to recapture the music of her voice, to savour the words that she had spoken—"I'll be wanting a lot of books then"—and to twist a thousand wonderful meanings from them. Nor was he jealous as he watched her glide past in the arms of Ross Thatcher or Morris Williams. Maybe they did have slick lines to peddle, maybe they were good dancers. But they hadn't read Rupert Brooke.

On the way home he was more than usually silent. Aunt Em, accustomed to his taciturnity, noticed nothing out of the way. "Well, I must say the new teacher seems like a real nice girl," she acknowledged. "She sat right down and talked to me like she'd known me all her life." Then she added slyly. "I figger she's got her eye on you, Neil. She asked an awful lot of questions about you and seemed mighty interested in everything I told her. Everybody thinks she's a real nice girl, though. Seems to me you could go farther and fare worse."

"Nothing doing, Aunt," said Neil, and he tried hard to make his voice sound matter-of-fact. "I'll give the other boys a chance."

But the words rang hollow. And later, in his room, Neil lay awake until daylight, reliving every moment of the miraculous experience. And he looked forward into the future, to the evenings they would spend together, the things they would talk about, and at length the warm, passionate kisses they would exchange. And there would come the day when he would lay in Moira's hands the copy of his first book. It might be a novel, or, preferably, a slim volume of sonnets. He would say nothing, but no words would be needed. She would read the dedication—"For Moira, who will understand," and she would say, softly: "You did this—for me?" And he would murmur, "Only you, Moira." And suddenly they would be in each other's arms and heaven and earth and all eternity would stand still in the ecstatic moment of their kiss.

Once and for all he abandoned the stern asceticism propounded by Kipling. He who travelled alone might travel fast, but what virtue was there in speed, anyway? The heights could be attained only by one who had the inspiration of a woman's love to urge him on. Presently Neil got out of bed and lit the lamp. He opened his well-thumbed copy of Byron until he came to the lines that the stormy-hearted poet had written long ago to someone whom he had loved:

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to the tender light
Which Heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress
Or softly lightens o'er her face,
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

MUSIC AT THE CLOSE

Too bad about the raven tresses. But one could always substitute auburn without spoiling the metre, and otherwise the words were perfect. Neil repeated them over and over to himself, like a litany to the one he worshipped. "That's it," he said, "that's it. She walks in beauty!"

And some day he would tell her so.

Chapter Three

BUT NEIL did not spend all his hours dreaming. His meeting with Moira Glenn had revived old ambitions and given them new focus. He wanted to make her feel not only interest but actual pride in him, and he knew that a baseball reputation, however impressive in itself, was not enough. Education alone could raise him to her level, or perhaps a little above it. Reading was fine in its way, but he had for a long time felt that whenever he picked up a novel he had no other purpose in view than to shut out reality. He needed training, direction. And Moira Glenn compelled him to take stock of himself and acknowledge his shortcomings.

But he had no idea how he might get any more formal education. He had left school seven years ago, with Grade Nine standing; now he was twenty-two years old, long past the time when the yoke of academic discipline rests lightly. But for once he did not succumb to his inclination to day-dream. True, he thought a good deal about the degrees that he would some day have after his name—B.A., M.A., Ph.D., F.R.S.C.—and how they would look in print—but he also took positive steps to see that his dreams reached fruition.

Two days after the dance he drove into Riverview and called on Mr. Dawlish, the local United Church minister. He did so with considerable misgivings. He had always been inclined to regard clergymen as a class apart from the common run of humanity, and therefore to be avoided. His attitude was partly due to ignorance. Uncle Matt and Aunt Em had gone to Pine Creek schoolhouse regularly in the days when student missionaries—wistful, homesick boys from eastern theological colleges—held service there once a fortnight during the summer, but they had never pressed Neil to go, and he had preferred to spend his Sunday afternoons at the swimming hole. But once,

not long ago, he had taken Aunt Em to church in Riverview and had liked Mr. Dawlish, probably because he had quoted extensively from Rupert Brooke. He was an M.A. of a famous eastern university and it was known that he wrote articles for various literary and church periodicals. Logically, Neil should have consulted the High School principal, Andy Kane, who also held an M.A. degree, but he found Kane's bluff manner and loud assertive voice offensive. He felt sure that Mr. Dawlish would be more sympathetic.

Mr. Dawlish welcomed Neil warmly. He was a man in his mid-thirties, with thinning hair and mild blue eyes. An earnest student of ancient history and the church fathers, he would have been more at home in a chair of theology than the pulpit. But he was a devout Christian, who, having absorbed something of the ascetic spirit of the early fathers, believed in the mortification of the flesh. He did not like Riverview and he did not like the West; but he had stubbornly refused the offer of a congenial post in a Toronto church publishing house that he might carry on, with indifferent success, work in a field for which he felt active distaste.

Neil explained in halting phrases that he wanted to qualify for admission to the provincial university in a year's time. Mr. Dawlish looked at him with a kind of wistful enthusiasm in his pale eyes. "You're an ambitious lad, Neil," he said. "Three years' work in one will test your measure. But it can be done. Yes, it can be done."

Neil leaned forward eagerly. "And could I write my final exams next summer and be ready for college a year from now?"

"Strictly speaking, no. You should pass the examinations for all three grades in turn, after having studied under supervision. But there are times," and Mr. Dawlish smiled slyly, "there are times when it is more moral to circumvent the law than to abide by it. It so happens that the deputy minister of education in this Province is a very good friend of mine—we were classmates in Arts at college back east. What I suggest, Neil, is that you buy the necessary text-books for all the grades, and spend your time on mathematics and the sciences. I'll give you what help I can. You should have no trouble with subjects like history and literature and composition. Then, next June, if I think

that your progress warrants such action, I'll see to it that you are permitted to write the Grade Twelve examinations. If you pass you'll be able to go to university in the fall, conditioned, of course, in languages. But if you can get up three years' high school work in one, you'll have no difficulty carrying one or two extra subjects in college."

Neil left the manse walking on air. For a while his imagination ran riot; he saw himself on the platform at Convocation, receiving his degree with highest honours, while the audience thundered acclaim and Moira Glenn smiled proudly at him from the front row. Nor was the vision quite dispelled when he looked through the formidable stack of text-books which he would have to master. Most of the literature he knew already—a few of Shakespeare's plays like *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, novels like *Quentin Durward* and *Oliver Twist*, that a kid could master in an evening. But the volumes of mathematics and physics were strange and alarming. In these, he knew, his real work must lie.

He began studying as soon as harvest was over. Infused with a kind of holy zeal for learning, if not for its own sake then certainly for what it might lead to, he at first studied as many as ten hours a day. Aunt Em regarded his new enthusiasm with benevolent amusement; like the fads which had preceded it—stamp-collecting, correspondence with boys in foreign countries, wood-carving and muscle-building—it would last perhaps a month and then be quietly laid aside. But Uncle Matt gave Neil unexpected encouragement. "Glad to see you at your books, Neil," he said diffidently one evening, when they were alone for a moment after supper. "Me, I never got beyond Grade Four. Figger it makes a difference, bein' educated. Gives you somethin' to think about besides crops."

Neil looked at the old man in grateful surprise. It had not occurred to him that Uncle Matt ever regretted his lack of schooling. But all he said was, "I guess it helps some people, all right." He and his uncle had never discussed anything in their lives. It was hard to begin now.

True to his promise, Mr. Dawlish gave Neil what help he could. Neil went to see him once a week, and for several hours they puzzled over problems in geometry and algebra and

physics. Mr. Dawlish had forgotten most of his mathematics but his enthusiasm gave Neil a much-needed stimulus. "Lay the groundwork, Neil, lay the groundwork," he urged. "If you know the first ten chapters, what comes after is easy. Or so I'm told."

Neil grinned ruefully and plugged away. It was cruelly hard work, and the subjects other than literature and history did not interest him very much. At the end of a month he had mastered less than a third of what he had planned to do, and near panic gripped him. At this rate he would be an old man by the time he matriculated. So for a week or two he worked harder than ever; he settled down to his books immediately after breakfast and, with only half an hour off for his mid-day meal, worked steadily until supper-time. But his powers of concentration were unequal to the strain, and he tended to spend more and more time going over the literature books with which he was already familiar. Presently he was doing no more than an hour or two of solid work each day. Aunt Em smiled wisely and held her peace.

Neil's loss of interest was not entirely due to the difficulties which he met with in his studies. Moira Glenn had provided the original incentive, and now she was failing him. He had gone several times to the Langleys to see her, bringing with him on each occasion a parcel of carefully chosen books. Moira seemed glad to see him, but there were always others present—people like Doug. Thatcher and young Porky Williams and sometimes Gil Reardon. They monopolized Moira and left Neil to look after odd girls like Minnie Whittaker who happened to be present. He had no chance to talk intimately to Moira about books or anything else. He was disappointed at first and, later on, resentful. He had believed that Moira had singled him out from everyone else in the community, that she had detected in him qualities setting him apart from the common run of humanity, that between them there had been established from the very beginning a bond originating in their mutual appreciation of Rupert Brooke and the higher things of life. But Moira treated all the young men who came to call with impartial friendliness, and the knowledge that his original impression was wrong hurt Neil more than he liked to admit.

He wanted to tell Moira what he was doing, wanted to let her know, without directly telling her, why he was doing it. But the opportunity did not come; and since his original objective was no longer attainable, he lost interest in the ends by which he had sought to reach it.

One cold November afternoon Neil drove into town to see Mr. Dawlish. The minister received him in the chilly little study of the manse, and Mrs. Dawlish brought them a pot of tea and some buttered toast. Over his second cup Neil made his confession. "I guess I just haven't got what it takes, Mr. Dawlish," he admitted. "At first it seemed easy, but now when I think of what I've got to learn in the next few months I feel it's no use. I guess I'm just not a student."

Mr. Dawlish looked at him unhappily. "I know things haven't been going so well lately, Neil. But you *are* a student. I've had enough to do with the academic world to know a scholar when I see one. You're the real thing." He stirred his tea and looked vaguely embarrassed. "There's nothing on your mind, Neil? Nothing that you'd like to tell me about?"

For a moment Neil hesitated. Confession might bring relief. Then he seemed to hear himself saying, "I'm in love, Mr. Dawlish," and the words sounded so absurd that he blushed. "No," he said at last. "Not a thing, Mr. Dawlish."

He spoke with such vehemence that Mr. Dawlish looked up in surprise. "I'm glad to know that, Neil. Then you'll keep on. Because, being a scholar, you won't be able to do anything else. You may think that you hate your studies, but you won't be able to stay away from them."

Neil arrived back home in an unhappy state of mind. He hated to disappoint Mr. Dawlish; and besides, quitting hurt his pride. But Mr. Dawlish was wrong in thinking him to be a scholar. Without any other incentive than the love of learning for its own sake, he knew that he could not go on. The best thing to do was to make the break now, to throw away his books and tell Aunt Em and Uncle Matt that he was through. He would not need to see Mr. Dawlish again.

He went into the house, carrying an armful of parcels. Moira Glenn was sitting in the chair beside the kitchen range. "Hello,

Neil," she said. "I brought back your books. And I'd like some more, please. Mrs. Jardine said you wouldn't be long."

Neil was glad that he had his arms full of parcels. Laying them on the table kept him occupied until he had recovered his composure. "You shouldn't have bothered, Moira," he said, trying hard to speak casually. "I could have picked them up some time."

She was wearing a brightly coloured sweater and plaid skirt. Her smile was friendly, but disquieting somehow. And she looked different, although he didn't know why. He felt suddenly uncomfortable and stood by the table, groping for words that would not come. Then Aunt Em appeared in the cellarway with a jar of preserved peaches and the tension was broken. "Take Miss Glenn into the livin'-room, Neil. She's stayin' for supper."

Aunt Em was flushed and excited. Visitors were rare in winter-time, and the teacher was an especially distinguished guest. Neil took his cue. "It's more comfortable in the living-room," he said. He spoke abruptly, for he was ill at ease.

"Can't I help you with the supper, Mrs. Jardine?"

Aunt Em shook her head. "I'll have things ready in no time," she said. "You'll just have to take pot-luck."

Moira and Neil went into the living-room. The warm fire in the big heater, the frosted windows shutting out the world, the dim light radiating from the oil-lamp on the centre table, created an atmosphere of intimacy that thrilled Neil and made him nervous. Moira sat down in the big armchair and crossed her legs. Neil put a lump of coal on the fire and poked at it unnecessarily. "Getting colder out," he said.

"Yes, I suppose it is."

She looked at him, and there was something in her expression that was vaguely troubling. Strangely, his mind went back to the day when he and Gil Reardon had met. Gil had looked at him then in a way that had made him feel uncomfortable, just as he felt now. He sat down, and tried to keep his eyes off Moira's slim legs. "You shouldn't have made a special trip just to bring the books back," he said.

"But I do want more," she said. "And you haven't been over for weeks."

"I know. But you see—" He hesitated and was lost.

"I'm sorry there were always so many people around when you did come. It wasn't much fun. But there aren't so many—now that the weather has turned cold."

She laughed lightly. Neil laughed with her. But he was still on his guard. Her laughter was gay and careless but the speculative look still lingered in her eyes.

"The fact is," he said, "I've been awfully busy lately."

"Oh?" There was curiosity and a kind of disappointment in her voice.

Neil nodded soberly. "You see, I'm studying now."

"Studying? Whatever for?"

"Well, I'm getting up the high school work I've missed so I can go to university next fall." In spite of his efforts to keep a matter-of-fact tone, his voice rose.

Moirra's eyes were suddenly full of strange lights. "Oh, Neil, how marvellous! I just knew you had something special in you!"

Neil blushed again, this time with pleasure. Moirra's enthusiasm was genuine. She leaned forward in her chair, her face eager and alert. "Please, Neil, tell me everything about it."

He told her. And in the telling, the work that lay ahead was no longer formidable. For, sitting there in the dimly lit living-room, the girl's eyes fixed on his face, he experienced again the warm, intense surge of emotion that had swept over him the night of the dance. With the emotion the incentive to achieve was re-created, stronger, more impelling than ever before. There were no limits now that could circumscribe his ambition, since its fulfilment carried with it the reward of which he again dared to dream.

After supper they walked together across the snow-covered fields to the Langley place, where Moirra boarded. It was a cold night with a strong wind blowing, not the kind of weather to encourage wayside dalliance. But Neil did not mind. He was filled with a sense of consecration. There was a goal to be reached before the reward be enjoyed. Moirra held his arm tightly, and talked most of the way home. He answered her almost absently. Already he had projected himself far into the future, was seeing himself a year hence—three years hence—with

the first of his degrees after his name, worthy now in Moira's eyes, confident in the face of the world. But until then, work, self-denial, long hours of toil in the attic room, concentration beyond the limits of ordinary mental power—these he must practise and endure.

"Good night, Neil."

Moira stood inside the storm porch and looked at Neil, her hand still inside his arm. A pale moon had forced its way through the ragged edge of a cloud and some of its light fell on her upturned face. "Good night, Moira," said Neil gravely. "I'll be over soon with some books."

A faint smile lifted the corners of her red lips. "Thank you," she said. For a moment she did not move. Then suddenly she turned and ran into the house.

Neil looked after her in some surprise. Then he turned up the collar of his overcoat and started back over the drifted trail. He wished he had had the courage to kiss Moira good night. But he could not risk disturbing the relationship that had been so delightfully renewed. And she might not have liked being kissed.

He was up the next morning before daybreak. For an hour before breakfast he plugged away at algebra, by the dim light of a smoky oil-lamp, and felt romantic and confident and cold. After a few days he abandoned early rising but he stuck to his books with an intensity of concentration that produced results. By degrees the work began to come more easily, and soon he was able to face the future with some assurance. Mr. Dawlish had been right, the first ten chapters were the hardest.

He drove in two or three times a week now to see the minister, and Mr. Dawlish was enthusiastic about his progress. "I told you that you wouldn't be able to quit, Neil," he said, with just a trace of self-complacency in his voice. "Because you're the real thing, the pure Renaissance scholar. There aren't many of you nowadays."

Neil smiled wisely to himself. Mr. Dawlish was wrong. He was no Renaissance scholar, learning only for learning's sake. He was a man with a purpose beyond mere learning. But of that purpose only himself and Moira Glenn would ever know.

The approach of Christmas brought with it a problem that caused Neil many a sleepless hour. He was determined to give

Moira a Christmas present, but he could not make up his mind what the present should be. He consulted in vain the mail-order catalogues and the Riverview shop windows. His private inclination ran to something intimate and luxurious, like one of the negligées that women wore in the pages of the slick magazines, but he had no faith in his taste, and besides he had read somewhere that a real gentleman gave a lady only such gifts as books or chocolates, never anything intimate like lingerie. It seemed an unreasonable convention, but Neil thought he had better play safe and abide by it. In the end he did what all along he had known he would do. He bought Moira a book, a volume of Rupert Brooke's poems. He was only half-satisfied with his choice, but he could think of nothing more appropriate.

There remained the problem of the inscription. What was he going to write on the fly leaf? He knew what he wanted to write—"To Moira, with all my love," but he did not have the courage. At last he wrote simply, "To Moira from Neil, Christmas, 1927," and did the book up in the most expensive wrapping paper that he could find in Riverview.

He waited until she had gone home for the holiday, then mailed the book to her. The same day he found a parcel waiting for him at the post-office. Moira's name and address were written in one corner. He carried the parcel home and up to his room, where he gloated over it in triumph. When he had torn off the wrapping paper a leather-bound copy of the poems of Rupert Brooke lay in his hand. He laughed aloud, joyously. No other gift could have pleased him so much. Her choice proved beyond all possible doubt that they were twin spirits.

He opened the book and read the inscription, "To Neil, with my love. Moira." There was a slip of paper inside the cover; on it was written, "Why didn't you come to see me before I left?" Neil put the note away in his desk. Then he sat down and wrote a long letter to Moira. He thanked her for the book and quoted several of his favourite passages from Brooke, making appropriate comments on each of them. He explained that he hadn't called to see Moira before she left "because you are always surrounded by a mob of admirers—and I hate competition." And, greatly daring, he wrote at the end—"all my

love. Neil." It was his first love letter, and he read it over several times with great enjoyment. Having sealed it, he rushed back to town in the Ford and mailed it at once. He had never been so happy in his life.

Gil Reardon's mother died on Christmas day. Neil went to the funeral, two days later. It was bitterly cold, with a few flakes of snow drifting down lazily from a steel-grey sky. Only a handful of mourners followed the coffin to the Catholic section of the Riverview cemetery, and everyone seemed relieved when the ritual was over. Big Dan Reardon was a broken man. Throughout the service he sat with bowed head, tears streaming down his cheeks, his body shaken by uncontrollable sobs. At the graveside he collapsed. Neighbours assisted him to a near-by car.

Gil made no move to help his father. He and Neil left the cemetery together. When Gil spoke, Neil was appalled by the concentrated bitterness in his voice. "The old man put on a great show, didn't he?"

Neil, startled, did not answer. Gil got into his roadster and stared out across the white fields. "He gave her hell for thirty years, and now that she's escaped, his heart is broken. And he expects *me* to stick around and comfort him. But I'm going, Neil—I'm going. Not today, maybe—but some time soon. And I'm never coming back."

They rode downtown together. Then Neil got into Uncle Matt's Ford and drove home over drifted roads. On the way he thought of many things. He thought of the old Gil whom he had known so well, and of the new Gil whom he did not know at all. He thought of Mrs. Reardon, tired, worn and gentle, gone now beyond reach of all things mortal. And though he tried hard to stifle it, he could not quite suppress the feeling that she should not have died on Christmas Day. His perfect happiness was perfect no longer. And because he blamed Mrs. Reardon he was ashamed of himself.

Chapter Four

NEIL WROTE his examinations in June. He found several of the papers almost childishly simple, and although he had a struggle with chemistry and trigonometry he was sure that he had at least got marks high enough to permit him to write supplemental examinations in the fall, before the opening of university. A college education, once a remote ideal, was within his reach. He was exalted. For two days after the examinations he wandered about the farm, too happy and too excited to concentrate on even the simplest tasks. "Aunt Em was moved to worried protest. "Land sakes alive, Neil Fraser, what ails you? If the neighbours see you runnin' around like a hen with her head cut off they'll swear you've gone crazy. That's what comes of all this studyin'. You used to be a sensible fellow like everybody else, and now half the time you don't know whether you're goin' or comin'. And neither do I."

Neil whooped joyously, threw both his arms around his astonished aunt and kissed her soundly on the cheek. "Cheer up, Aunt Em," he said. "You just wait till I've been to college for a year, then you'll be wishing I was like I am now." And whistling slightly out of tune, he went off to the garage for the car. There was a baseball practice that night in Johnny Watson's pasture. Neil had missed the two preceding practices but now that he was free from the burden of study he was determined to miss no more. Tonight's practice was an especially important one. The big Dominion Day tournament at River-view, with two hundred dollars first money, was only two days away, and Johnny had exhorted Neil to be on hand for the final pre-tournament workout.

The Riverview tournament was one of the biggest in the country, attracting teams from up to a hundred miles away. The Wildcats had no hope of winning; their fielding had

improved a good deal since the previous year, and the Williams twins who played left and centre field had developed into powerful hitters, but Neil was the only pitcher on the team, and his work had so far been highly inconsistent. Once or twice he had worked brilliantly, but lack of practice had aggravated his natural wildness and his season's performance had so far been mediocre. "If you'd just forget your books for a while," Johnny Watson had complained bitterly one evening after River-view had knocked Neil out of the box, "mebbe you'd turn into a ball-player." Johnny's outburst summed up the prevailing attitude of the team. The members felt vaguely that Neil was letting them down for something that didn't matter very much. Only Gil Reardon refused to join in the chorus of criticism. He regarded Neil with a kind of puzzled respect and held his peace.

But on the day of the big tournament Neil knew that there was a great day ahead of him. The strain of study was over, he was a free man, and Moira would be there to see him play. He had seen very little of Moira lately. But he knew that she would understand why he came to see her so seldom. He was confident of her loyalty, hopeful of her love. She would be going away soon on her holidays, but he planned to see her nearly every minute of the time that remained. And today, with Moira cheering him on, he would play the greatest game he had ever played. His faith sprang not from any overnight acquisition of skill but from the knowledge that he had carried through a long and difficult undertaking to a successful conclusion. He felt capable of accomplishing miracles because he had in himself the power, and in Moira the inspiration.

The Wildcats knocked out the weak Hinesville team in the first round, eleven to three. Johnny Watson pitched. Neil played errorless ball at first base and hit two mighty home runs. In the second round he pitched against a Riverview team powerfully bolstered with ringers, and shut them out with four hits. After he had struck out the last man, he swaggered from the field and whacked Johnny Watson hard between the shoulder-blades. "Satisfied now?" he yelled.

"You're durn tootin'!" Johnny yelled back. "Boy-oh-boy, what a game—what a game!" Johnny's freckled face was red

with exertion and excitement. "Red Hill next, boys! Easy peanuts on a day like this! What say we take 'em?"

"We'll take 'em," said Neil confidently. Gil Reardon looked at him in astonishment.

"What's got into you, Neil?" he said.

Neil laughed light-heartedly, and hurried over to the Langley car, which was parked behind the big wire back-stop. Moira got out of the car when she saw him coming. She was wearing a short, light-coloured summer dress and she had had her red hair shingled in the newest fashion. Neil had never seen her looking so beautiful. "Neil," she said breathlessly, "you were wonderful! But then, you always are. Now take me somewhere and buy me a hot-dog. I yelled so much I worked up a tremendous appetite!"

He bought hot-dogs at the Ladies' Aid booth and they returned to the car and ate them and drank a bottle of pop each. His pop finished, Neil lit a cigarette and leaned back comfortably. "Moira," he said, "I'm taking you driving tonight."

He had wanted to sound casual and sophisticated. But the moment he had spoken the words he knew that they were wrong somehow. Only he didn't know why. He looked at Moira and smiled self-consciously. "I mean—that is—" he stumbled, "if you're free."

Moira shook her head. "I'm sorry, Neil," she said. "I wish you'd asked me a little sooner."

"I suppose you're going to the dance?"

She nodded, "Yes. But perhaps I'll see you there?"

"You know I don't dance." He felt suddenly angry. She must have known that he hadn't had a chance to learn. "You see, I've been so busy all winter that I haven't had much time for that sort of thing."

"I know. Have you finished your exams?"

"Two days ago." If she had been really interested she would have known.

"Oh—I'd forgotten. Tell me about them."

"They weren't too bad," he said shortly.

She studied him, a quizzical expression in her green-flecked eyes. "Neil, I wish I could go driving with you tonight. But I thought you'd forgotten about me."

"Forgotten you?" He stared at her, amazed. "But why?"
"Why not?"

He waited a minute before replying. He wanted to express what he was feeling in biting, ironic phrases. But the right words would not come. "I thought you'd understand," he said. "I was so busy. And I thought you knew why I wanted to get to college."

She laid her hand lightly on his arm. "Sir Galahad," she smiled, "chasing the Holy Grail."

He took comfort from her words. "Tomorrow night, then?" he said.

Her face was troubled, unhappy. "Neil, I'm busy tomorrow night, too. I never thought—"

He threw his cigarette out of the open window. "O.K., Moira," he said. His voice was hard and bitter. "My mistake. Sorry I embarrassed you."

He opened the car door and got out, slowly, so as to give her a chance to speak. But she did not say anything. Neil shut the door and stalked away. He heard her call his name but he did not turn back. And when she caught up with him and slid her hand under his arm he looked down in well-simulated surprise. "Neil," she said. "Perhaps if you called tomorrow night—I might be able to arrange something."

"That'll be fine, Moira," he said. "About eight?" His voice was sober, controlled, but he felt like shouting. She wanted him, then, wanted him so much that she would break a date so that she could go out with him. With the realization, his confidence returned. "That'll be just fine, Moira," he repeated, and patted her hand.

They went back to the car and, between innings of the semi-final between Red Hill and Duane, Neil told Moira about the exams. When the umpire-in-chief announced that the final would be played immediately, he got out and hitched up his belt. "So long, Moira," he said. "See you after the game."

"Knock 'em down, Neil," she answered. "Your public expects it of you."

"You're the only public as far as I'm concerned," he said. Then without waiting for her reply—it might have spoiled the dramatic effect of his line—he went off to find Gil Reardon.

The final game of the tournament, between Pine Creek and Red Hill, is one of the memorable games in the annals of the Riverview sports day. The Wildcats, all local boys drawn from the community of Pine Creek, were overwhelming favourites with the huge crowd of spectators. Red Hill was notoriously a "money" team, well padded with ringers drawn from various small towns up the line, and this time including a pitcher from the city, a big, raw-boned left-hander named Comstock, celebrated for his speed and control.

From the first the game was a pitchers' battle between Neil and Comstock. Neil, pitching his heart out, struck out six Red Hill batters in the first five innings. But they hit him spasmodically, while the Wildcats were unable to touch Comstock's terrific fast ball. In the sixth, disaster threatened the Wildcats. The first Red Hill batter worked Neil for a base on balls after fouling off five successive pitches. Gil Reardon walked out towards the pitcher's box, rubbing the ball in his big mitt. "That's pitching, old man," he said. "Thorne missed the last two—you caught the corners both times. All set now for a double play!"

The second batter hit a long fly which Porky Williams caught in deep left field. His throw-in was wild and the runner reached second. Gil grinned and held up a finger. "Heads up, you guys," he called to the infield. "One away! Play everything to first."

Comstock was up. He swung hard at the first ball pitched and topped it back to Neil. Neil faked a throw to second to drive the base-runner back, then threw to first. But his peg was wild and pulled Johnny Watson off the bag. Comstock was safe and there were runners on first and third. The Red Hill bench was in an uproar and the spectators were pleading with Neil to tighten up.

Neil wiped the sweat from his eyes with the back of his hand. He felt suddenly tired. There were two men on base, only one out, and the top of the Red Hill batting order coming up. He waited a long time before throwing the ball, trying to get control of his nerves. Then he threw a sharp-breaking curve over the inside corner. The batter ducked forward and the ball hit him

on the back of the head. He dropped in the dirt, and the Red Hill supporters shrieked imprecations at Neil.

The batter revived quickly and trotted to first, filling the bases. But Neil was seemingly shaken beyond hope of recovery. He threw twice, wide of the plate, and from all sides rose the wolf cry—"Take him out!" Neil looked over at Johnny Watson. But Johnny shook his head and shouted, "Bear down, Neil, bear down, old man!" Bill Gammon, the shortstop, came over to talk to him. Neil scowled at Gammon and rubbed the ball nervously. Then he stepped on the rubber and tossed it towards the plate. The batter swung savagely at the ball and topped it into the dirt in front of him. Gil Reardon sprang forward, pounced on the ball. He could have touched home plate for an easy force-out; instead he gambled on a double play and lined a waist-high peg to first. Johnny Watson, racing for the bag, caught the ball on the dead run, touched first and whipped the ball home. His peg was low, but Gil scooped the ball out of the dirt and with almost contemptuous ease tagged out the runner sliding home. Without waiting for the umpire's signal, he threw his mask towards the bench and began stripping off his protector. The temper of the crowd changed in an instant. "Great work, Neil, great work!" they chanted. Neil's knees were weak under him as he walked to the bench.

Johnny Watson was first man up in Pine Creek's half of the sixth. He hit a weak roller to third; the ball struck a pebble and the third baseman juggled it momentarily. Johnny was safe. Comstock bore down on Porky Williams and struck him out on three pitched balls. Neil followed Porky and likewise struck out. He was helpless against Comstock, and missed the last pitch by a foot.

Gil Reardon came to bat. He swung hard at the first pitch and fouled it in among the cars. He watched a strike and two balls go by, then connected solidly and drove a hard line-drive into right field. It went for two bases and Johnny Watson beat the throw home. Then Gil stole third, and when the catcher's peg went into left field he raced in with the second run.

After that there was nothing to it. With a two-run lead to give him confidence, Neil was unbeatable. And in the last of the eighth he drove out a long hit that scored two runs and might

have been a homer had he tried to stretch it. Red Hill, a beaten team, went out in order in the first of the ninth and the game was over.

The last man out, the crowd rushed out onto the diamond. Men he did not know surrounded Neil, whacked him on the back, shook him by the hand and triumphantly led him and his fellow Wildcats down to the beer parlour of the Palace Hotel. Neil did not want to go. He wanted to see Moira, to hear her words of praise; but he was overcome by excitement and the feeling of good fellowship created by victory. Joe Bullock was already established in the beer-parlour. "Didn't wait to see it out, ole man, ole man," he explained, clinging affectionately to Neil's shoulder. "Knew you had 'em cold after Reardon socked one. Great li'l ball-player, Gil is—great li'l ball-player. Have a drink—have two drinks."

For a moment Neil hesitated. He had tasted beer before and had been repelled by the yeasty sourness of it. Besides, he would be seeing Moira soon. So he shook Joe off. "Not now, Joe," he said. "Thanks a lot. Too early in the day for me."

He went outside and started back towards the sports grounds. Dusk had fallen. As he walked along the dusty track leading to the grounds he met a stream of cars on their way to town, lights glaring, horns honking. Drivers and passengers shouted to him in passing, and his heart warmed. Small boys swarmed about him, giggling high-school girls hurrying home arm in arm looked at him with admiring eyes. Some of them spoke to him and he grinned back happily. His arm ached and there was a pleasant stiffness in his legs. He had never felt so wonderful in his life.

The Langley car had gone by the time he reached the diamond and he had a moment of bitter disappointment. Uncle Matt's Ford was the only car left on the grounds. Twilight was giving way to darkness and the light was growing pale and dim in the western sky. Suddenly Neil shivered and a strange, unaccountable depression gripped him. He jumped into the car, stepped on the starter and drove along the trail in pursuit of the long line of cars heading for town. He picked up half a dozen youngsters and in listening to their excited chatter quickly recovered his high spirits.

He drove home at top speed. Aunt Em, who had been too

tired to go to the sports, had a hot supper waiting for him. He bolted a few mouthfuls, then carried a tin tub full of water upstairs to his room and had a bath. He shaved for the second time that day, and dressed carefully in the new made-to-measure suit which he had just bought through a Riverview merchant. Then he shouted a goodnight to Aunt Em and Uncle Matt, who were already in bed, and started back to town.

He had no clear idea of what he was going to do. Perhaps he would go to the show with some of his cronies—Gil Reardon would be hanging about somewhere—but he did not altogether relish the prospect of two hours' enforced inactivity. More than likely he would go to the jitney dance being held in the big open space behind the town hall where an outdoor floor had been set up. There he would see Moira. More than that, he would speak to her. And perhaps, if he said the right things in the right way, she would go for a walk with him—walk with him away from the dance floor into the shadows, and they would get into his car and sit there in the darkness.

And now his imagination leapt beyond the limits of the real and the immediate. They were driving along the river highway, away from the town, and Moira was saying, a trifle breathlessly but with something in her voice that told him she was glad, "Neil, Neil, you *must* turn back!" And he would reply, confidently, because he knew that she wanted to be with him, "Not yet, Moira, not for a long time. Let's turn down here and look at the river. It should be beautiful in the moonlight."

And without waiting for her reply, he would turn down a side-road and park on the river bank at a point well screened by trees, but overlooking the river far below. Later, when she was in his arms, her kisses hot on his lips, he would ask her to marry him. "I know it's a lot to ask, Moira," he would say, wistfully, "Three years before I graduate—and even then— But, darling, I love you so much, so very much. Will you wait for me?" And Moira, her face upturned to his, her eyes radiant in the moonlight, would say simply, "I'll wait, Neil—wait if need be to the end of time. There will never be anyone but you. . . ."

He parked in a lane near the dance floor and made his way through the dense crowd of onlookers who stood outside the roped-off enclosure. The floor was crowded with dancers

millling slowly under the harsh glare of the string of overhead electric lights. The air swarmed with insects. Attracted by the lights, they hung in great clouds above the heads of the dancers. The orchestra sat on a raised platform at one end, and the music sounded faint and thin under the vast dome of the sky.

Neil stood for a long time outside the rope barrier but he could not see Moira among the dancers. He was on the point of buying a ticket which would admit him to the platform when Morris Langley slapped him on the shoulder. "Hi, Neil."

"Hi, Morris. Out for the evening?"

"I'll say I am!" Morris's face was damp with sweat and there was a glazed look in his eyes. "Me and the missus don't step out very often, but when we do we make a night of it!" He belched happily and swayed against the rope barrier.

"I suppose Mardie and Moira are around somewhere," Neil said casually.

"Mardie's up shakin' a hoof with young Porky Williams. But I ain't seen Moira. She was home waitin' for Gil Reardon to pick her up when we left, 'bout two hours ago. Gil must of run out of gas!"

Morris snickered, and pushed off somewhere through the crowd. After a minute or two, Neil followed. His heart was suddenly full of a vague disquiet. Gil Reardon and Moira. Somehow it had never entered his mind that Gil was interested. He went to the car, got in and smoked half a cigarette. Then he started the car and drove back to the highway.

He followed the highway for a mile or two in the direction of Pine Creek. He passed one or two cars, but none of them was Gil Reardon's roadster. Presently he turned onto a side-road that led past the Langley place. He felt unhappy and vaguely ashamed. But he knew that he could not rest until he found out where Moira was.

He drove through the wide-open gate and into the Langley yard. There was a car parked at the door. Neil got out and saw that the car was Gil Reardon's roadster. A light burned dimly in the kitchen. The rest of the house was in darkness.

Neil wanted to pound on the door, shout at the top of his voice. He was in the grip of a kind of wild anger that demanded expression in violent action, but there was enough of the civilized

man in his make-up to restrain him from any outburst. He stood beside the car, frustrated and helpless, raging inwardly and strangely afraid. Presently he got back into the car, slammed the door as loudly as he could, and stepped on the starter. As he did so, the kitchen door opened and Gil Reardon stood framed in the light that streamed out from behind him.

"Hello, Neil," he said.

Neil shut off the engine, got out of the car and walked towards Gil. "Hello, Gil," he said. His voice sounded harsh. "Where's Moira?"

Gil came down off the kitchen steps and advanced to meet him. He jerked his head in the direction of the house. "Upstairs getting ready. She didn't get home from the sports as soon as she'd figured. I've been hanging round for nearly half an hour waiting for her to get fixed up. You know how women are." Gil's breath was heavy with the smell of stale beer, and some of his words were slurred.

"I was talking to Morris Langley in town. He said that Moira was waiting for you two hours ago."

Gil's eyes flickered momentarily. "So what? She wouldn't let me know that, would she?"

Neil looked towards the house. There was no light anywhere except in the kitchen. Moira's room was at the back. "Look here, Gil," he said, "what's all this about, anyway?"

Gil lit a cigarette. In the light of the match his face looked hard and ugly. "Listen, Neil," he said, "don't you think it's time you grew up?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. I *have* been here for two hours. And if you don't know why, you'd better read a book about it. And now I'll ask *you* something. What are you snooping around here for, anyway?"

Neil hit Gil hard in the face. Gil, caught off balance, fell sideways to the ground. He got up slowly and wiped the blood from his mouth with a handkerchief. "Neil," he said, and there was sudden desperate entreaty in his voice, "I'd have told you before—only I didn't know you were that way—"

"You filthy cur." Neil's voice was quivering with rage and fear. He lunged forward and swung again at Gil's white face.

Gil blocked the swing, then caught Neil's arms and hung on. "Neil, for God's sake, snap out of it!"

Neil broke away. "We started this fight ten years ago. Now we'll finish it."

"Sure, Neil," Gil said. "Sure. If that's the way you feel about it."

Neil rushed forward. Something hit him on the side of the head and millions of stars whirled about him. He wavered uncertainly on his feet and an agonizing wave of nausea swept over him. Dimly, through the maze of whirling stars, he saw Gil standing very straight, his arms hanging by his sides. He swung again at that white face in the moonlight. Gil stepped back and tripped over a stone. He went down heavily, and his head hit the bumper of his car. He groaned once, rolled over and lay still.

Neil held his aching head in his hands. Behind him he heard a door bang—then the click of high-heeled shoes along the gravel path. Without a word Moira dropped to her knees on the grass, beside Gil. She slipped her arm under his head and tried to lift him. Then she looked up at Neil and her eyes were wild. "You coward—you coward! You've killed him!"

"I hope so," Neil said.

Gil groaned again and tried to sit up. "Get some water from the house—quick!" Moira commanded Neil. But he stood looking at her and did not move.

"I'm O.K.," said Gil. He got shakily to his feet, Moira assisting him, and rubbed the back of his head with his hand. "We were having a little wrestle—just for fun. Guess I must have slipped."

Neil took one of Gil's arms and drew it around his shoulder. They stumbled along the path to the kitchen door. Then Neil saw Moira's face clearly in the light from the kitchen and straightened up. "You look after him," he said. "He's all yours."

He left Gil swaying dizzily on the steps and hurried to his car. As he drove out of the yard he looked back. Gil and Moira were standing together at the kitchen door. Gil was leaning on the girl for support and her arm was around his waist. Neil turned his head quickly and stared straight in front of him; then he jammed down the accelerator and drove off into the night.

Chapter Five

IT WAS five minutes before nine o'clock and the campus, almost deserted a minute before, swarmed with students hurrying from classroom to classroom. As Neil walked towards the Medical Building he could smell the smoke from a big bonfire behind the row of red brick residences. The sun shone on the early morning frost which had not entirely disappeared from the grass, and far off on the other side of the river thin columns of smoke were rising straight into the air. On such a morning threshing machines would be humming on many farms, and Neil felt a sudden twinge of nostalgia. Harvest-time is the most memorable of seasons and he was missing it for the first time in many years.

He went into the Medical Building and along the corridor to the big lecture theatre where Dr. Gregson's class in English One was held. The corridor was permeated with the mingled smells of disinfectant and hydrochloride. Neil hurried up the steps past curving rows of seats until he reached his own row, about halfway up in the theatre. The tall girl with the long yellow hair who sat in the seat ahead of his was already in her place. Her name was Helen Milholland, and she was easily the best-looking girl in the class. Once or twice, before the beginning of the lecture, she had spoken to Neil. Her voice was low and pleasant, and she talked without self-consciousness. This morning she smiled and said hello. Neil returned her greeting and slipped into his place. He was glad that he did not sit directly behind her, but just a little to one side, so that he could study her profile without embarrassment.

The theatre filled up quickly. The moment the bell rang, Dr. Gregson appeared in the doorway. He was a big man physically, with a shock of greying hair and a lean, haggard face. He was said to be suffering from some obscure disease that no

doctor had so far been able to diagnose. His reputation as scholar was excellent; he wrote learned articles for learned periodicals and had published a book on the origins of the ballad that had won international recognition. It was also popularly rumoured that he wrote lurid detective stories under an assumed name. All Freshman Arts students were required to take Gregson's English One—a survey course in English literature from Chaucer to Wordsworth. The course was not a popular one. Gregson had the reputation of a martinet; and the percentage of failures in English One was alarmingly high.

But, so far, English One was the only course that Neil really enjoyed. Latin and French were cram courses and as such involved a great deal of routine memory work without any compensating intellectual stimulus. History Two—Modern European—was barely tolerable because of the infinite dreariness of the lecturer, an earnest young man who read steadily for an hour each day from his notes, and who was apparently without a spark of humanity in his composition. After the first week, Neil had tried to change his history section, but had been rebuffed by the Registrar's office. Already he was spending the greater part of each history lecture hour composing verses which he hoped might be accepted by the student publication, the *Wheatsheaf*. But, so far, he had not been able to finish any of the poems. His other courses, Political Economy and Philosophy, were less boring than History, although neither subject really interested him.

But Dr. Gregson was a masterly lecturer. When he read poetry in his deep, rolling voice, Neil felt strange shivers running up and down his spine. Besides reading superbly, Gregson had a host of interesting anecdotes at his command which he told with all the tricks of the accomplished raconteur. In English One he made little attempt at critical analysis; in his own words, the purpose of the course was to create an interest in the great masterpieces of English literature, not through dissection but through reading in the light of the author's personality and environment. Already Neil came close to worshipping the man. Gregson epitomized what he thought the scholar ought to be—immensely learned but possessed of the common touch. He could not understand Gregson's sinister reputation on the campus

or the sheer hatred with which some of his former students spoke of him.

This morning Gregson was lecturing on Sir Thomas Browne, whom he held up to the class as a model of English in the grand style. Without preliminary, he opened the text and began to read:

What songs the Sirens sang or what names Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling questions are not beyond all conjecture. What time the persons of these ossuaries entered the famous nations of the dead, and slept with princes and counsellors, might admit a wide solution. But who were the proprietaries of these bones, or what bodies these ashes made up, were a question above antiquarianism; not to be resolved by man, nor easily perhaps by spirits, except we consult the provincial guardians, or tutelary observers. Had they made as good provision for their names as they have done for their relics they had not so greatly erred in the art of perpetuation. But to subsist in bones, to be but pyramidally extant, is a fallacy in duration. Vain ashes which in the oblivion of names, persons, times and sexes, have found unto themselves a fruitless continuation, and only arise unto late posterity as emblems of mortal vanities, antidotes against pride, vainglory and madding vices. Pagan vainglories which thought the world might last forever, had encouragement for ambition, and finding no *atropos* unto the immortality of their names, were never damped with the necessity of oblivion. Even old ambitions had the advantage of ours, in the attempts of their vainglories, who acting early and before the probable meridian of time, have by this time found great accomplishment of their designs, whereby the ancient heroes have already outlasted their monuments, and mechanical preservations. But in this latter scene of time, we cannot expect such mummies unto our memories, when ambition may fear the prophecy of Elias, and Charles the Fifth can never hope to live within two Methuselahs of Hector.

Neil closed his note-book and sat back in his chair while the deep voice read on and on. He did not understand much of what old Browne had written, but no one could fail to respond to the majestic cadence of the balanced lines. Even Pinky Wilson, star halfback on the football team, who had failed English One three times running, was listening with obvious enjoyment. Suddenly Gregson closed the book with a snap.

"At the conclusion of my last lecture," he said, "I told you that I would expect you to be thoroughly familiar with the selection from Sir Thomas Browne, part of which I have just

read. In a class of this size it is, of course, impossible for me to examine each of you individually in order to determine whether or not you are doing your work." He took off his horn-rimmed glasses and polished them with a silk handkerchief. He held the glasses up and looked through them at the skylight, re-polished one lens, and laid them on the desk. "It is my custom, however, to pause from time to time and question one or two of you, choosing the names at random from my roll." He paused again and looked slowly around the room. "Needless to say, I expect that all of you prepared the selection from Browne before coming to class and that you are ready to answer precisely and intelligently any questions you may be asked. If you are not ready to do so, there is no place for you in this class."

He replaced his glasses, opened the blue-covered class record book which lay on the desk and slowly ran his finger down the first page. He paused once or twice, then turned the page over. An audible gasp of relief went up from those whose names began with A. Dr. Gregson continued his leisurely survey of the roll. Somewhere near the top of the amphitheatre a girl giggled hysterically. Dr. Gregson turned another page. Suddenly the long, almost transparent forefinger stopped; an agonized hush settled over the classroom. Dr. Gregson looked up. The class waited tensely. Dr. Gregson's finger moved on down the page. The girl near the top of the amphitheatre laughed outright.

"Fraser. Mr. Neil Fraser?"

Neil sat bolt upright. Dr. Gregson was looking around the amphitheatre. "Mr. Fraser. Mr. Neil Fraser? Emerge."

Neil held up his hand. Two hundred and fifty pairs of eyes were on him and his face flushed fiery red. Dr. Gregson looked at him through horn-rimmed spectacles as if he were some strange animal. But his eyes were not unfriendly. They were watchful, intent. That was all. "Mr. Fraser, you have no doubt prepared the passage before coming to class?"

In dumb misery Neil shook his head. Dr. Gregson removed his glasses. He was smiling, but now his eyes were cold, expressionless. "You have *not* prepared your assignment, Mr. Fraser? Will you please explain why?"

"I read it over, sir," Neil stammered, "three times. But I didn't understand all of it."

Dr. Gregson's face was suddenly benign. He leaned forward and took the class into his confidence. "Mr. Fraser didn't understand all of it," he said. The apple-polishers in the front row laughed with forced heartiness. Dr. Gregson stared at them blankly and their laughter subsided into a series of embarrassed titters. Dr. Gregson looked again at Neil.

"I am pleased, Mr. Fraser, that you have confessed that your comprehension of Sir Thomas Browne is limited. I myself have been reading the "Urn Burial" for forty years, and cannot claim to understand all that is in it. But, Mr. Fraser, while you digested Sir Thomas by the light of the midnight oil, you made use of your dictionary. Any young man who reads his assignment no less than three times is sure to make use of a dictionary. You are therefore, no doubt, able to explain to us the meaning of the word *atropos*. 'Pagan vainglories which thought the world might last forever, had encouragement for ambition, and finding no *atropos* unto the immortality of their names, were never damped with the necessity of oblivion.' *Atropos*, Mr. Fraser, *atropos*."

Neil had looked the word up in his dictionary, but he had completely forgotten what it meant. He struggled to recall the definition, to recreate in his mind's eye the printed lines as they appeared in the dictionary, and failed. Dr. Gregson waited patiently. "I'm sorry, sir," Neil blurted out. "I looked it up but I can't remember."

Dr. Gregson looked at the class. "Mr. Fraser can't remember," he said. This time no one laughed. He looked again at Neil. "I am sorry, Mr. Fraser, very sorry indeed that you do not remember the meaning of the word *atropos*. If you do not know the meaning of the word, you do not know the meaning of the sentence to which it belongs. If you do not understand the sentence, you do not understand the passage."

He picked up his text and opened it. Neil dared to breathe a sigh of relief. But the expression was premature; Dr. Gregson was not through yet. He closed the book again and fixed Neil with a cold stare. When he spoke his voice was filled with a kind of controlled bitterness. "Mr. Fraser, there are many kinds

of student in a university, good, bad and indifferent, but mostly bad. Among these latter are distinguishable certain sub-species of whom I will name only three—the loafer, the cheat and the dunce. If, as you say, you have read the assignment over three times, you are not a loafer. We will accept your statement as being accurate and agree that you are not a cheat. The sub-species to which you *do* belong is thus clearly established. And, Mr. Fraser, permit me to add this word of friendly advice: the loafer is sometimes an individual of fine mind who once his interest is roused may do brilliant work; the cheat sometimes repents and his repentance means joy in heaven. But the one who is merely stupid is beyond salvation. For him there is no place in this or any other university. After Christmas we gladly commit him to the honoured rôle of horny-handed tiller of the soil or stock-broker."

Dr. Gregson resumed his reading of Sir Thomas Browne. Neil, white-faced and shaken, heard neither text nor comment. He wanted to run out of the theatre, out of the building and hide himself where no member of the class would ever find him. He sat very still, staring over Helen Milholland's head at the great empty wall behind Dr. Gregson. Somehow, he felt raw all over, as if the flaying he had just endured had been physical as well as mental; he knew that if anyone touched him he would cry out.

But no one touched him. No one, had he only realized it, was interested in him any more. He had provided a few minutes' uneasy entertainment for his classmates and that was all. Because he had served as class scapegoat for the day, their only lingering feeling toward him was one of gratitude. But this he did not know, for he had no power to view what had happened with detachment.

The bell rang. Neil gathered together the books which he had piled under his seat. When he straightened up Helen Milholland smiled at him. "Too bad," she said sympathetically. "He was on the warpath, all right. But in a way you're lucky. They say he's like lightning—never strikes twice in the same place."

Neil responded with a sickly smile. "He certainly reduced me to my proper level in a hurry," he said.

"Judging by what some of the old-timers say, you got off pretty

lightly. Gregson has the reputation of being the toughest man on the faculty. And that's going some!"

Neil did not answer. In some queer, inexplicable way he felt resentful of the charge against the man who had been his idol. "Oh, I don't know," he said presently. "I had it coming to me, I guess."

They went out of the theatre together. "I saw you practising with the Arts football team last night," the girl said. "Great fun, if you can take it."

Neil concealed his pleasure with a casual shrug of the shoulders. "Inter-fac isn't like the big stuff," he said. "Just the lame and the halt and the blind. And, of course," he added, wincing, "the dunces."

He said good-bye rather abruptly and hurried away. He was rooming in a house a few blocks from the campus, in an attic room overlooking the river. As soon as he reached his room he flung himself out at full length on his cot-bed, one arm across his eyes. He felt physically sick, so intense was the humiliation that had overwhelmed him.

And yet he could not bring himself to hate Gregson. Part of his misery stemmed from the fact that he had failed the only man on the University staff to whom he felt drawn. There had been anger and scorn in Gregson's eyes; the anger he could have endured and resented; but the scorn cut to the very heart.

Lying on the bed, he relived not only the anguish of the morning's experience but all the disappointments he had met with during his three weeks of varsity life. It had all turned out so differently from what he had dreamed. Initiation with its countless petty and meaningless humiliations had resulted in no sense of fellowship, of belonging; he felt only active hatred for the smug sophomores to whose torments he had submitted and contempt for himself and his fellow freshmen for bowing so meekly to the tyrannical authority of the upper classmen. His boarding-house, too, was a source of bitter disappointment. He had looked forward to living in a university residence, but he had submitted his application too late and had been compelled to find a room in a private house. There were two other boarders in the house, overtown office workers whose manners and conversation were characterized by a cheap sophistication

that irritated Neil and drove him to seek refuge in his own room. His natural shyness prevented him from making friends quickly, even among congenial associates. For the first week he had spoken to no one and had been lonelier than at any previous time in his life.

Only in watching an intercollegiate football game did he experience the kind of emotional excitement that he had always associated with university life. The crash of opposing line-men, the spirited end runs, the long spiralling kicks awoke in him a strong desire to be himself a participant. Never before had he felt so powerfully the need of violent action. Two days after the game he stopped to watch some students going through a few ragged plays on the campus in front of the row of residences. A tall, fair-haired young man, who was directing the practice, spoke to him. "You an Arts man?"

Neil nodded. The tall young man looked him over with an appraising eye. "How about giving us a hand?"

Neil shook his head. "I've never played."

"That doesn't matter. No one would ever think that any of this outfit had."

Neil took off his coat and spent a joyous afternoon going down under punts and tackling ball-carriers. He was big and fast, with a natural talent for games. By the end of the week he had won a regular place at half-back. He knew nothing at all of the game, but by comparison with his team-mates he was potentially a star. One or two of the men on the squad played the game for the fun of it, but most of them regarded it as a possible means to campus advancement. The captain, Gerald Taverner, was a candidate for the Rhodes Scholarship, enduring skinned elbows and an occasional bloody nose with outward fortitude and inward anguish in order to qualify as a manly leader of men.

But except when he was playing football or listening to Dr. Gregson, Neil had been unhappy during the early weeks of college. Now one of his pleasures had been taken from him, and he wondered how he could bring himself to face his classmates in English One again. Life was cruelly unjust. He told himself bitterly that he was probably the only really interested student in the entire class, and on him Gregson had chosen to vent his malicious spite. A university, it would seem, was an

institution existing for the discouragement of scholars. Neil was so pleased with having coined something that sounded like an epigram that for a moment he forgot his misery. Nor was the epigram one that sacrificed truth to wit; so far as he could find out, few people came to university in order to learn anything in the first place. The sole concern of most students seemed to be to select as many "sap" courses as their time-tables would accommodate—courses which seldom bore any relationship whatever to the interests the students might have had. Neil had read Barrie during the summer and the scholar had become his newest ideal—the man who immured himself from the world in order to pursue knowledge, who lived if necessary on potatoes and buttermilk in order to sit at the feet of some renowned professor. But at university there were no such students; and most of the professors were dull young Ph.D.'s to whom learning meant specialization in some obscure field which was of no earthly interest to anyone except themselves.

Presently Neil got up and went out. He walked downtown across the big bridge that spanned the Saskatchewan and ate his lunch in a second-rate beanery. Afterwards he sat through a dull movie. When he got back it was four o'clock. He changed into his tattered football uniform—a first-team discard of five years before—and began to feel better. He had no football boots, so he wore tennis sneakers. When he walked across the campus towards the football bowl he experienced for a moment the kind of thrill that used to come to him at baseball tournaments when he felt that the small boys and girls were looking at him with wonder and admiration in their eyes. But only for a moment. His sweater was faded and moth-eaten, his pads shapeless lumps of felt that protected the wrong places. Down on the oval the regular squad was going through a stiff signal drill, and Neil felt a pang of bitter envy. But, perhaps, next year he would be one of them.

At the gate leading into the grounds Taverner, the Arts captain, overtook him. "We've got just twelve men turning out," Taverner said. "Think you can last sixty minutes?"

"I guess so," Neil said. "I'm in pretty good shape."

Taverner grunted. He hated being knocked about and the prospect of a full hour's bruising punishment depressed him.

But he maintained a stern front and even gave his faithful twelve a cultured pep-talk before they straggled out on the field.

Their opponents, the Engineers, were fast and enthusiastic and crude. They rolled over the unhappy Arts men for huge gains and tackled with a complete disregard of life or limb. But they fumbled frequently and were penalized scores of yards for countless infractions of the rules, so that the Arts men were able to hold them to four touchdowns and a field goal. In the last minute of play Neil recovered a fumble and ran the length of the field for a touchdown. The half-dozen spectators on the sidelines cheered vociferously. Neil felt better than he had done in weeks. It was just possible that college wasn't going to be so bad, after all.

There was a letter from Aunt Em waiting for him at the boarding-house. He did not bother to read it until after supper. Aunt Em's letters were usually pretty dull, and this one, when he read it, proved no exception. But there were one or two references in it that caused Neil's blood to race: "Dan Reardon is selling out, and I guess your uncle will go to the sale. It starts at one o'clock, because I guess Dan doesn't want to have to put up a lunch. They say he is going to the coast. The new teacher is a Miss Pennifield from Red Hill. I guess the Langleys like her all right, but Mrs. Langley says she's pretty fussy. Everyone is sorry that Miss Glenn isn't coming back. No one seems to have heard from her since she left. I think she might have written to Mrs. Langley anyway. She seemed a real nice girl, but I guess she's just as thoughtless as the rest of them."

Neil put the letter away and got out his books. But he could not study. Presently he put the books back on their shelf and went for a long walk. Usually when he went for a walk he crossed the big bridge and strolled up and down the main street. He liked the glitter of the city, the crowds and the noise. But tonight he went down by the river and followed a path that ran through the trees, close to the water's edge. It was a cloudy night, and from time to time a few flakes of wet snow drifted past. He wondered where Moira was now and what she would say to him if they ever chanced to meet. Perhaps she was in the city; perhaps they would meet face to face on the street some day, or find themselves sitting side by side at a lunch counter.

He could not bear the thought of such a meeting. Inevitably it would bring to life the humiliation and anguish he had endured on that night when he had first learned of her infidelity. Yet paradoxically he longed to see her; for he could not believe wholly that she was as cruel and treacherous as her behaviour suggested. Nor could he feel that she had passed completely out of his life. He was still too young to feel that anything was irrevocable.

On his way home he dropped in at the Varsity Tuck Shop on the edge of the campus. The big room was filled with chattering students, but Neil found a vacant table in a corner. He sat there while he ate a cinnamon bun and drank a cup of coffee. Two girls approached his table; one of them was Helen Milholland. "Hello," she said. "All the tables are full up. Mind if we sit here?"

Neil got up. "It's all right," he said. "I was just going."

The girl flushed. "I'm sorry," she said. "We didn't mean to chase you away."

"No," he said. "I was really going."

He went outside. He had wanted to stay and talk, but he had been afraid. For however his reason denied it, he still clung to the dream that had Moira Glenn for its centre. He could not believe that she had betrayed him. But Helen Milholland had the power to destroy his dream. Her beauty and her charm were not illusory but real. And so, because he had no faith in the strength of his own loyalty, he ran away.

Chapter Six

CHRISTMAS examinations were a week-long nightmare. Neil sat up until two and three o'clock every morning, snatched an hour or two of troubled sleep, and returned to his notes for a frantic last-minute review before going to the examination room. Even in his most optimistic moments he had no hope of anything better than a bare pass in French and Latin; but he believed he might have got an A in English. An A in the class in which he had been publicly humiliated would have done much to restore his morale. But none of the results were posted before the holidays, and Neil went home depressed and apprehensive.

On the farm nothing had changed. For the first few days Neil passively resented the lack of even the few comforts that he enjoyed in his boarding-house. It was a nuisance to have to heat water in a tin basin whenever he wanted to shave; an even greater nuisance to have to carry water upstairs in a tin tub and bathe in a chilly room. He hated stepping out of bed onto icy linoleum and putting on clothes so cold that they gave him goose-flesh all over. But insensibly he slipped back into the old ways and by the end of the two weeks' vacation the petty inconveniences had ceased to irritate him.

For the first week he stayed at home nearly all the time. Pine Creek was too actively associated in his mind with the pain that he had suffered to permit the easy revival of old associations. He was sure that no one knew what had happened that first of July night, but he still felt vaguely unhappy in the company of his old cronies. The result of his unsociable attitude was one that he should have foreseen. Mrs. Langley told Aunt Em that college wasn't doing Neil much good and that he had obviously come home with a lot of stuck-up notions about being better than his neighbours. Aunt Em, much upset, promptly reported

the conversation to Neil, and Neil, genuinely distressed because he could not endure being thought of as a snob, thereafter conscientiously made the rounds of all the neighbours. He spent New Year's Eve at Johnny Watson's place, where a community party was held. It was Julie Watson, still vivacious and fun-loving in spite of the cares of four children, who brought up Moira Glenn's name. "Yes, indeed, Neil," she said, "we all thought she had you taped—"

"*And hog-tied!*" interposed Johnny. Johnny had been sampling the contents of various bottles brought by the guests and his eyes were unusually bright.

"—But I suppose a country school-marm isn't good enough for you. Like as not you'll be coming home one of these days with the president's daughter on your lap. But you'll go a long way before you'll find anyone as pretty as Moira."

"Her legs," said Johnny judicially, "were the best I ever saw."

Julie turned on him sharply. "What's that you're saying, Johnny?"

"I was saying, when you interrupted me, that Moira's legs were the best, with the exception of my dear wife's, that these old eyes have ever rested on."

"She was well turned out all over," Mrs. Watson agreed, contemplating her own still shapely legs with satisfaction. "Funny no one's heard from her."

"Or old Gil Reardon," interposed Porky Williams. "But maybe you have, Neil?"

Neil shook his head.

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised if the two of them was together somewheres," said Mrs. Langley suddenly. "She was a sly minx in a lot of ways. And Gil was always hangin' round although he pretended he didn't care anything about her. But he did. And they went away 'bout the same time and nobody's heard anything from either of them since. I say just put two and two together and see what you get."

"Not what *you* think, Mrs. Langley." Neil was smiling but his face was suddenly white.

"Oh ho!" Mrs. Langley exclaimed gleefully. "So you *have* been hearing from her! I figgered I'd draw you out!"

Neil laughed and turned away. Inwardly he was raging. He

could not explain to himself why he had lied to defend Moira's name. She had treated him shamefully, dragged his love in the dirt. But he saw red when anyone attacked her. Later, he assured himself that his chivalric nature had prompted him to her defence. He would have done the same for any girl who was being slandered.

He was glad to get back to university. The examination results were about as bad as he had feared—D's in Latin and French, C's in History and Economics and Philosophy, and a B in English. But at least he had passed in everything. He felt sure that after he had got rid of the incubus of languages he would distinguish himself. He was disappointed about his mark in English, but it was some consolation to know that there were only four A's in the class. Probably he could count himself among the first ten. He wrote to Mr. Dawlish, saying that he had passed with fair marks and that he expected to do really well as soon as he had found his feet.

Shortly after the beginning of the second term he had a poem published in the *Wheat-sheaf*. Poems were used by the *Wheat-sheaf* editors as convenient filler when there were no interesting gossip items or risqué jokes available, but Neil did not know this and he was elated. The poem was in the manner of Swinburne, with a good deal of emphasis on alliteration and words like lotus and weary. It appeared over his name and he hoped that Helen Milholland would say something about it in class. But she seldom spoke to him now, beyond a cool good morning, and he was too shy to begin a conversation. He was sorry that he had rebuffed her in the Tuck Shop, but he did not know how to make amends. He admired her more every day, and quite irrationally resented the fact of her popularity. She seemed always to be surrounded by young men, mostly medical students, who hung around in the corridors before and after English lectures. He knew that his resentment was ridiculous but he could not entirely suppress it.

Although the poem aroused no comment whatever—Neil presently reached the entirely logical conclusion that no one had read it—the mere fact of publication was in itself an inspiration. Night after night, when he should no doubt have been studying, Neil laboured over odes and sonnets, and occasionally a short

story. He even began a novel, a thrilling tale of adventure in India, but bogged down halfway through the third chapter. He did not submit any more of his work to the *Wheatsheaf*. Instead, he bought a second-hand typewriter and sent laboriously typed manuscripts to the university quarterlies, to *Poetry*, and to several of the slick periodicals. All the manuscripts were returned without comment. Neil assured himself that all authors had a struggle to establish themselves. Just the same, he was bitterly disappointed. But he continued to stick fairly closely to a schedule which permitted him at least two hours a day for original composition. The quantity of work which he was thus able to produce was impressive, though he found it difficult to finish anything. His bureau drawers were full of sonnets lacking a final couplet and short stories without a denouement.

Halfway through the term he attended an open meeting of the University English Club. The meeting was held in the Ladies' Common Room of the Arts building, and in spite of the bait of refreshments, drew only a score of students and one or two junior faculty members, earnest young men who puffed at large pipes and mingled with the undergraduates on terms of uneasy familiarity. The undergraduates were mostly honours English students. A few timid strays, including Neil, herded together in one corner of the room.

Gerald Taverner, ex-captain of the Arts football team and Rhodes Scholar Elect, was chairman. He told two jokes, one about Shakespeare and one about young Dr. Phillips of the Department of English, who was present at the meeting. He then introduced Don Hodgson, the speaker of the afternoon. Hodgson, a senior honours student, was a slight young man who wore heavy homespun tweeds and smoked menthol cigarettes. He read, with considerable assurance, a paper on H. L. Mencken. Neil had never heard of Mencken, and Hodgson's extravagant eulogy disgusted him—"Mencken the iconoclast, the greatest modern force to challenge outworn tradition, mediaeval attitudes of mind, conventional idol-worshippers who, half-Januses, look into the past and ignore the future!"

Hodgson concluded amid a spattering of applause. The discussion which followed was strained and perfunctory. It was

a relief when coffee and doughnuts appeared, and the meeting broke up into small groups. Neil found himself beside Dr. Phillips, who lectured to Freshman Engineers and was reported to be at work on a study of Donne's imagery. Dr. Phillips was small and thin with pale blue eyes popping out of a head that seemed much too large for his body. He had studied under Kittredge at Harvard and was reported to have created considerable confusion in his classes by his attempted imitations of the great man's mannerisms. "Not a bad paper," he said genially to Neil. "Not bad at all. A stout-hearted defence of a lost cause."

"You don't think much of Mencken, then?" Neil was not really interested in hearing Dr. Phillips' opinion, but he felt that he had to sustain the conversation somehow.

Phillips chuckled. "I don't think of him at all," he said. "No body—no substance. A paradox, if you like—aggressive in a negative way. With Mencken robustness is all. *Passé*—definitely *passé*. The surface reflection of a passing phase. No more than that. The surface reflection of a passing phase."

He bit into a doughnut and looked with interest at the gap in the circle which his teeth had made. "I suppose *your* god is T. S. Eliot?"

Neil had never heard of T. S. Eliot. "What makes you say that?" he hedged.

"I can spot a T. S. Eliot disciple a mile off. Brooding despair—wan hopelessness—we are the hollow men, we are the stuffed men lost in the wasteland look. Withal, admirably set up physically and obviously enjoying life. You epitomize the type." Dr. Phillips gulped down the remnant of his doughnut.

"As a matter of fact," said Neil, "I prefer Rupert Brooke, and Swinburne."

"Good Lord!" Dr. Phillips seemed genuinely shocked. His eyes were more protuberant than ever. "I didn't know that anyone read Swinburne or Brooke nowadays."

Neil flushed. "Well, I do," he said defiantly.

Dr. Phillips looked him over. "I don't doubt it," he said, and reached for another doughnut. The girl carrying the plate of doughnuts, a fourth-year honours student with straight fair hair and pimply complexion, spoke to him.

"Dr. Phillips, is it *really* true that when the engineers put a little pup on your desk you told them when you came in that you were glad they had at last got a lecturer on their own mental level?"

Neil left the apple-polisher to her work and escaped. As he reached the door he heard Dr. Phillips explaining that Mencken was only the surface reflection of a passing phase. Next day he got a volume of Mencken's *Prejudices* and a collection of T. S. Eliot's poems from the library. Mencken shocked and offended him. He attacked almost everything that Neil had hitherto held sacred, and his weapons were blunt instruments. He battered down whatever he attacked by sheer weight and noise. But much of what he said, for all its crudeness, seemed unanswerable. Neil spent an unhappy hour trying to frame a reply to his attack on poetry. In the end he threw Mencken away and turned to T. S. Eliot.

He found Eliot at first incomprehensible. But as he read on, the words, which in themselves seemed without meaning, began to weave a strange and sinister spell. He was first depressed, then savagely rebellious. Surely the end of poetry was not to plunge men into black despair? But "The Hollow Men" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" could have been intended to serve no other purpose.

For some days thereafter Neil found it impossible to concentrate on his assignments. He was getting farther and farther behind in his Latin and French, and each day was precious. But work now seemed futile. What was even more serious, he no longer took any pleasure in the composition of his own rigidly traditional verse. After "The Hollow Men" and "Sweeney Agonistes," conventional love lyrics, even when infused with a generous quantity of Swinburnian pessimism, seemed precious and false.

But an assignment in English One proved his salvation. In a list of topics for essays, Dr. Gregson included one entitled "Dreams." "Make of it what you will," he said to his class: "It is a topic designed to challenge those among you who find the copying of long passages from reference books and attempting to pass them off as your own, an undertaking that is stale, flat and unprofitable."

Neil hurried back to his room and in a mood of exalted excitement wrote steadily for two hours. He missed his lunch and felt romantic and hungry. He made the topic an excuse to justify romance and to attack the "false realism" of the modern school, with particular reference to H. L. Mencken and T. S. Eliot. The first draft completed, he hurried to the Tuck Shop for something to eat, then returned to his room and re-wrote the essay three times before typing out a final draft. The essay was, he felt, the finest thing he had ever done. The conclusion was particularly pungent. "Dreams, translated into action, have been responsible for all of the advances made by mankind. Columbus dreamed of a new empire, and discovered America; Rousseau dreamed of a new state of man, and out of that dream flamed the French Revolution with its accompanying emancipation of the human spirit; William Wordsworth dreamed of a new kingdom of literature, and out of that dream the *Lyrical Ballads* were born. Let us honour the dreamer, for he alone is able to show the way to a new and better state of society. When man ceases to dream he ceases to live."

His essay was returned to him two weeks later, with a mark of D. Neil was stunned. He had put heart and soul into the writing of the essay, and his reward was the lowest mark he had yet received in any English assignment. When he read the remarks at the end of the essay he tore the pages into shreds and threw them away. "There are indications in this essay that you have some talent for expressing yourself; unfortunately, it does not appear that you have anything worth while to express. Much of what you have written sounds like the emotional babbling of an adolescent schoolgirl. Throughout, sense has been sacrificed to sound. Your conclusion is mere verbiage and does nothing except indicate your ignorance of Columbus, Rousseau, the French Revolution, Wordsworth, and the principles of social progress."

It never occurred to Neil that anyone other than Dr. Gregson had marked the essay. Actually it had been marked by Don Hodgson, Gregson's assistant, who found in marking a convenient outlet for his innate sadism. Gregson, himself an incurable romantic, might conceivably have liked much of what Neil had written. But Neil knew nothing of this; for him, the verdict

was crushing and final. He spent the first part of the evening lying on his bed and staring at the ceiling; afterwards he went for a long walk and got back to his room half-frozen. He was in a state of bewildered frustration. It was clear now that he would never be a scholar; it was equally clear that he would never be a writer. What was he to do? He had no particular interest in any profession, and to return to the farm would be to confess himself a failure.

Unexpectedly his problem was solved for him. At noon the next day his landlady gave him a telegram that had just arrived. It was from Johnny Watson. "Uncle Matt died this morning. Come home at once."

Chapter Seven

JOHNNY WATSON met Neil at the station. From Johnny he heard the details of Uncle Matt's death. "Went out to milk the cow and didn't come in for breakfast," said Johnny. "Your aunt found him stretched out on the floor of the loft. Heart. Doc says he must have died in a few seconds. One good thing, he didn't suffer none. When I go I hope it's like that."

Neil nodded. "A good way," he said. Long ago, when he was under the spell of Browning, he had felt that death was a thing to savour. "Let me taste the whole of it!" he had cried with the poet. Now, so close to the actuality, he felt differently. He did not talk much on the way home; and he dreaded meeting his aunt.

But Aunt Em was outwardly calm. So far she had not shed a tear. Mrs. Langley and Mrs. Williams were with her, and Mrs. Williams led Neil into the bedroom where Uncle Matt lay in his coffin. Neil had not expected to feel any grief. Uncle Matt had always been a silent, remote figure, who seemed outside the common current of life. But when he looked down at the old man's face he experienced a wave of emotion which choked his throat and blinded his eyes with tears. The feeling was not so much one of grief as bitterness. Was this the end and fulfilment of life? Uncle Matt had once been young and ambitious and full of hope. He had dreamed his dreams—limited dreams, perhaps, but not ignoble. And he had lived eighty years—for what? His life had been one unremitting round of hard work, of self-denial, of striving against the forces of nature. He had established a home and in the end he had freed himself from debt, but by then he was old and unable to relax the habits of half a century. Now he was dead. His face

was a little greyer, his cheeks a little more shrunken than in life, but that was all.

And yet, as he reviewed in his mind Uncle Matt's drab life, Neil knew that by comparison with numberless millions with whom the earth had teemed, Uncle Matt could count himself blessed. He had never known hunger, he had always had a roof over his head and enough clothes to warm his body. If he had ever endured great spiritual anguish it had left no visible mark on him. And he had married a woman who for fifty years had walked beside him in unquestioning and inflexible loyalty. Judged in the light of the common lot of man, Uncle Matt's lot had indeed been a happy one.

And as he stood looking out of the window across bleak, snow-covered fields, Neil told himself that Uncle Matt's life had not been devoid of beauty. For he had loved the land with an inarticulate, single-minded intensity, and perhaps any other emotional outlet would have been superfluous. It was no small thing to be on intimate terms with the earth itself, no ignoble life that was dedicated, however blindly, to the nourishing of life. And now that he was dead, Uncle Matt would be at home in the earth he loved. It was not for the dead, Neil told himself tritely, but for the living that one should mourn. For fifty years Uncle Matt had been Aunt Em's husband and companion—silent, unobtrusive, ever present. His going meant the end of the only relationship that gave her life meaning. Uncle Matt had lived and died and the earth would welcome him. But now Aunt Em must walk alone and in darkness.

The funeral service was held in the little Riverview church. Neil was surprised at the large number who attended. The church was unable to accommodate everyone and many stayed outside in their cars. Mr. Dawlish preached the funeral service. He was ill at ease, for he had hardly known Uncle Matt. But Neil thought that he said the right things: "The patriarchs of ancient times tended their flocks and grew old and died. In the lovely words of the Hebrew poets, they were gathered to their people. No one counts their lives unfortunate or wasted; rather we feel that they above all other men of the ancient world lived the kind of life that was pleasing in the sight of God. For certain it is that the Lord Himself was not

above sharing the meal of the patriarch Abraham in his tent on the plains of Mamre. The man whom we today honour and commit to the earth tended his flocks and grew his crops for four-score years. Now he, too, after a life which in the final estimate was productive only of good to mankind, has been gathered to his fathers. For him there should be no tears. He has fulfilled the highest destiny of man, a destiny so seldom realized—that he be humble in the sight of God and a blessing to all who know him.”

The cemetery was a bleak, treeless patch of ground a mile outside town, situated on a rise overlooking the railroad tracks. Neil had always hated the sight of its desolation, with the few naked tombstones rising obscenely from unkempt patches of grass and weeds. Better by far, he had always thought, an unmarked grave on a hillside or in a quiet valley. But today, when Uncle Matt was lowered into the earth, he did not mind. A cemetery lined with shady trees and crossed with well-kept avenues would have been out of keeping with the landscape. Between life and death there was a sombre harmony. And besides, it made no difference to the dead.

After the funeral Aunt Em collapsed. For twenty-four hours Neil scarcely left her bedside. He told her that he would stay on the farm as long as she needed him, and his promise seemed to comfort her a little. Just before she dropped off into a troubled sleep, she said, in a voice that quivered with the intensity of her grief: “He was a good man, Neil. He never hated anyone and he never harmed a living creature.”

Later, Neil remembered her words. They were, he thought, no mean epitaph. For they told the truth and they justified the life which had come to a close. There were few men whose epitaphs did either.

Chapter Eight

ALTHOUGH NEIL pretended to himself that he was renouncing a career as scholar in order to remain on the farm with Aunt Em, he was secretly relieved not to have to return to university. His college year had been one of disappointment and frustration; and it was almost certain that had he written the final examinations in April he would have failed in one or more subjects. Now he was able to justify his withdrawal from the university to himself and his friends. Indeed, Mr. Dawlish went so far as to commend the spirit of self-sacrifice which he displayed, and Neil had the grace to feel momentarily ashamed. But he did not doubt that he would some day return to college and do brilliantly; indeed, he had every intention of spending at least a part of the summer brushing up his languages so that they would not again be an intolerable burden. But in the meantime it was pleasant to slip back into the routine of farm life. It was pleasant, too, to be able to read whatever he wished without the harassing feeling that he was neglecting his studies.

In the spring Aunt Em went East to visit relatives whom she had not seen for over thirty years. She had failed greatly since Uncle Matt's death; the rheumatism against which she had fought heroically for so long seemed suddenly to triumph over her and she now moved about with difficulty.

"Seems like I just got no call to keep on goin'," she said to Neil. "Not that I don't feel like lookin' after you, Neil, but you don't need me the way Matt did. And now that he ain't here, it don't seem right I should be, either."

Her face was much thinner now, and drawn in lines of pain and worry. Neil could do little to comfort her. He was glad when her sister wrote inviting her to visit in the East. But he had difficulty persuading Aunt Em to go. She who had once

epitomized strength and self-reliance was now pitifully afraid. "Seems like I'm leavin' everything behind that I ever had," she said. "And Kate'll be changed. Thirty years does things to folks. We'll be strangers."

In the end Neil went with her. For the first day Aunt Em sat huddled in a corner of her seat, silent and dejected. She refused to go into the diner and Neil could hardly induce her to eat a sandwich which he bought at a wayside station restaurant. But when the train entered the north woods of Ontario she brightened a little and seemed more like her old self.

Her sister Kate, three years her junior, had been widowed for ten years. She owned a prosperous dairy farm near Woodstock, which she ran with the utmost efficiency. Neil stayed in the big white frame house on the farm for three days, then because he wanted to get the parting over, pleaded the necessity of spring work and said good-bye to Aunt Em. She broke down and wept bitter tears at parting. Neil promised that he would come and get her whenever she wanted to return "home," but he knew that he would not see her again. Aunt Em had relaxed her hold on life, and was failing visibly from day to day.

Neil returned to the farm with grandiose schemes half-formed in his mind. The price of wheat was high; all signs pointed to its going still higher. Neil was now in full control of the farm, and half the proceeds were to be his. With any kind of luck he could clean up in a very short time. This year he intended to do as Uncle Matt had done ten years before—plant every available acre to wheat. There was a possibility, too, that he might be able to buy the Langley place for a reasonable price. With a tractor he could handle a section of land without difficulty. Five hundred acres of wheat at twenty bushel to the acre, the price a dollar and a half a bushel, and he would be on the threshold of wealth. "Three years from now," he assured himself, "I'll be able to retire and write. Write in the summer and go to college in the winter. Maybe McGill or the University of Toronto. Or maybe I'll go in for ranching in a big way—open up across the river or buy a ranch near Calgary. Anyway, it won't be long until I'm independent."

The country was still in the grip of the land fever which had taken hold during the early twenties. Neil had to pay thirty-five

dollars an acre for the Langley half section, but he had no difficulty in getting a loan from the bank at eight per cent. interest. Mr. Telfer, the manager, assured Neil that the bank was delighted to have the privilege of serving him. Then for a month Neil and his hired man ran the tractor eighteen hours a day and put in five hundred acres of wheat. The Langley place was weed-infested and badly in need of summer-fallowing, but Neil felt justified in taking a chance. Given heavy June rains, the wheat would crowd out the weeds.

But the heavy June rains did not come. There were scattered showers but no heavy downpour, and the weeds grew thick and rank. Neil did not worry greatly. He was sure of some crop—enough at least to enable him to meet the interest on the bank loan and make a further payment on the Langley place. And the land, after all, was his. No matter how small his actual cash capital might be, the landowner was a wealthy man. Perhaps Neil would not make his killing this year, but next year would be different. In the meantime, life passed pleasantly enough. Neil played baseball and drove about the country in his new Ford car. He crossed the river and visited the scene of the massacre that had taken place during the Riel Rebellion, travelled once or twice as far as the city, taking some of the neighbours with him each time, and in August drove alone to the mountains.

The trip to the mountains was a haunting and unforgettable experience. When he stopped the car on the heights above the little town of Cochrane and looked across the valley of the Bow at the mighty upheaval of granite that marked the beginning of the Rockies, Neil experienced the kind of emotion that had come to him only twice before—when he had heard Minnie Whittaker read "Ulysses" aloud, and when he himself had first stumbled upon the jewelled passages of Conrad. It was an emotion that had in it pleasure and awe intermingled, and above all a strange, indefinable pain, a longing for something that had no concrete substance. At Banff the feeling was not so marked; rather he felt overwhelmed and oppressed by the mountains. It was a relief and an ecstasy to be out on the plains again and to see the mountains far off, their white peaks flung against a background of pale blue sky.

Aunt Em died just before harvest-time. Neil's emotions were

mixed and disturbing. Death was this time far away, and it had been expected. Perhaps his chief sensation, had he cared to admit it, was one of relief. For Aunt Em, life had become a burden that she was glad to lay down. But her death meant the severing of the last human relationship that for Neil had in it any genuine affection. It shocked him profoundly to realize that there was no longer a single human being who was more to him than a casual acquaintance.

Aunt Em left everything to Neil. For a time he counted himself a rich man, but when, in the spring of 1929, he at last forced himself to take stock of his debits as well as his credits, he became faintly apprehensive. He owned, nominally, a section of land, but he still owed Morris Langley and the bank four thousand dollars. The new tractor and car were only partly paid for, and although he was not being pressed by the Riverview agents, he could not ignore the debt indefinitely. Running expenses were higher than he had anticipated and he still owed last year's taxes. But grain prices were soaring—one good crop and he would be in the clear. If he sowed enough wheat, even at ten bushel to the acre, he would make a clean-up.

He sold all the livestock on the farm and with the proceeds bought another quarter-section from Jim Lowery, lying directly east, for forty dollars an acre. Then, recklessly disregarding the fantastic growth of stinkweed, Canada thistle and couch-grass that infested most of his land, he again sowed every cultivated acre to wheat. This time, in spite of the dire predictions of all his neighbours, his gamble seemed justified. The rain came early; and the wheat fought its way up through the matt of weeds and flourished. By comparison with other crops in the district, Neil's was below average; but he had the greatest acreage for miles around. By the middle of July it was clear that, except for a major catastrophe like hail or frost, nothing could prevent him for reaping a profitable crop.

Neil felt delighted with himself. He had farmed for two years with a minimum of labour; he had started with three hundred and twenty acres of land and now he owned eight hundred. True, he had sold all the livestock; most of his equipment except the tractor was falling to pieces, and two-thirds of his land was weed-ridden. But he would be out of debt as soon as the crop

was off and sold; next year, with a substantial balance in the bank, he would begin to farm carefully and scientifically. Or perhaps he would sell out, travel for a year and then go back to college. He was conscious of a pleasant glow whenever he thought of the risks he had taken. It was good to know that there was something of the gambler's spirit in one—good to know that although his neighbours viewed his farming with contempt, they also regarded his success with a kind of wondering envy and respect.

Neil harvested nearly ten thousand bushels of number one wheat. His first emotion, when the final tally had been made, was one of sheer exultation. But later, when he had calculated what he owed, he was not so happy. Interest compounded at eight per cent. mounted up in alarming fashion; he had payments to make to the bank, to Morris Langley and Jim Lowery. He owed two years' taxes and was morally bound to clear up the debt on the car and the tractor. If he paid off everything he would have no money left for equipment replacement or general running expenses. And although he could easily sell the farm, he did not want to do so. He took pride now in being a large landowner; and he was ambitious to own the biggest acreage of any farmer in the country. He had it in mind to buy a half-section north of the Langley place, that ran right to the river. The land was heavily wooded and not much good for wheat-growing, but he wanted a river frontage. Besides, the land would make fair pasture for the cattle he hoped to have in a year or two.

It was Jim Lowery who pointed the way out of his difficulties. "The guy that figgers on makin' his pile out of just straight farmin' is a sucker," Jim told him. "Last year I grew a thousand bushel of wheat and put five thousand dollars in the bank. Folks wonder how. Well, I'll tell you, Neil. I played the market. With Europe takin' our wheat the way she is, and prices soarin', playin' the market ain't a gamble. If you use your head, it's a cinch. This year I got all my dough in futures. Right now if I cashed in I'd be worth twenty thousand. But I'm holdin' on for another two-three months. Then I figger I'll have enough to get me out of this dam' country and onto a fruit farm in B.C."

Neil knew nothing of playing the market. Lowery carefully explained. "You get a broker in Winnipeg to buy you, say, ten

thousand bushel on margin. All you got to do is put up a thousand dollars—ten cents a bushel. See? All right now, the wheat is like it's yours, except of course you can't sell it for two dollars a bushel and make a dollar-ninety profit. But what you do get is any increase in price over and above the market price you bought it at. Get it? Supposin' you lay your thousand on the line today and get ten thousand bushel on margin, and supposin' the price goes up ten cents tomorrow. Then you can wire your broker to sell and you make a clear profit of ten cents a bushel minus the broker's commission—pretty near a thousand dollars. Last year I cleaned up fifteen hundred on a three-day jump."

Neil was dubious. "Suppose it goes down ten cents?"

"I'm glad you asked me that, Neil. It's a point that a lot of fellers leave out of consideration when they take a flyer in the market. Well, if the price drops, you got to put up more dough or you lose your original investment. If it drops ten cents and you don't put up more dough, why you're wiped out. See? You lose your thousand. But you don't need to worry about that, not if you use your head. Sure, the price skids every so often, but that don't alter the fact that she's a risin' market and is goin' to be for quite a while. Any fool can see that."

"It seems to me it's too easy," Neil protested. "If that's all there is to playing the market, why doesn't everybody go in and clean up?"

Lowery spat a stream of tobacco juice into the dust at his feet. "That's another good question, Neil. I'll tell you why. You watch the market. Every so often the price slips, maybe as much as twelve-fifteen cents, then comes back so fast it don't make sense. But to the boys in the grain exchange it makes plenty. It's a risin' market, see, and lots of guys with a little cash come in to make a killin'. They use up all their cash makin' the initial payment, most of 'em not havin' enough sense to keep somethin' in reserve. Then bam!—the price skids, just enough to wipe out the little fellers who haven't got a reserve to back up their original investment."

Neil nodded, wisely. "But the fellow who can safeguard himself against a slump cleans up?"

"That's it, Neil—that's it in a nutshell. The fellow that

can safeguard himself against a slump cleans up. Way I figger it, you're a sucker to play the market on margin unless you can put up in ready cash the equivalent of your original investment. But if you can, you're safe. Once last year she skidded fourteen cents in two days. But I had the dough to put up—another ten cents a bushel, leavin' me a six-cent margin. In a week the price went up eighteen cents. This year I can put up an extra twenty cents a bushel if I have to. Of course, we all know the market's got to break or stabilize some time. There's a limit to what Europe's goin' to pay for our wheat. But the peak price ain't even in sight yet. Just the same, I'm playin' it safe and settin' myself a limit of three months. Then I'm cashin' in."

That night Neil thought for a long time about what he had heard. In spite of Lowery's assurances, he was far from convinced that playing the market was a sure way of making money; his common sense told him that the ordinary gambler on the market lost nine times out of ten. But the undeniable fact remained that Jim Lowery, who was stupid and uneducated, had cleaned up. Neil liked to fancy himself a gambler, but he was not really one by instinct, and he was not prepared to run serious risks in hope of a quick fortune. But a re-casting of accounts convinced him that unless he got his hands on some ready cash he was going to have a difficult time of it next year. In the end, he decided to risk a thousand dollars. He would cover, if necessary, to the extent of another thousand, then take his loss with good grace. But he did not really believe that there was a chance of losing.

He bought ten thousand bushel of wheat on a ten-cent margin, and thereafter tuned in every day for the market quotations from Winnipeg. In three weeks the price of wheat had gone up twelve cents, and he had more than doubled his money. But he held on, and invested another thousand dollars. He told himself that in so doing he was really investing the profits from his original investment. At the end of a month he invested another thousand, and his calculations showed a profit, on paper, of over three thousand dollars. It was unbelievable. Neil saw Jim Lowery and told him about it. Jim chuckled. "See what I meant? But listen, Neil. One of these days

there's goin' to be a slump—a big slump, see? And I'll tell you why. Too many little guys jumpin' in with both feet, includin' guys that can cover up to maybe twice their original investment. But once that slump is over—and the way I figger it the price may drop as much as twenty cents—once that slump is over, she'll shoot up like a sky-rocket. Way I look at it, Neil, we got our choice—clear out now and take small profits, or hang on through a little slump and then clean up. Me, I'm hangin' on."

The next day Neil sold the Langley place for five thousand dollars cash. He was now in a position to put up seemingly unlimited additional margin. As soon as his profits reached ten thousand dollars he would cash in. Life had never been so exciting; and he marvelled at the ease with which a man imbued with the gambling spirit could make a fortune. He felt contemptuous of his neighbours. They were making money, true, but slowly and at the cost of infinite toil. They lacked the venturesome spirit that challenged risk and reaped spectacular returns.

Towards the end of October Neil motored alone to the city. He spent most of his time moping rather unhappily around the university. For, in spite of the fact that his memories of the university were mostly unpleasant, he still had a romantic longing for the kind of life which he thought might be found at college under the right circumstances. He saw a football game and came away determined that he would return next year. He would live in residence, drive a car, make the first football team and confound Gregson and the rest of his teachers by the brilliance of his academic achievements.

He was so occupied during his week in the city, going to shows, browsing about in bookstores and wandering through the university campus that he had little inclination to read a daily paper. He was vaguely aware, through casual glances at headlines, that the New York stock market had slumped badly and that something like panic was sweeping Wall Street. But he was not much interested. After all, the New York stock exchange was three thousand miles away.

When he got back home he found several telegrams waiting in town for him. The wheat market had broken, and his broker

was calling for more margin. Neil wired two thousand dollars. He had expected something like this, for Jim Lowery had warned him. All the same, he could not help feeling anxious. That evening he drove over to see Lowery.

"Well, young feller," Lowery greeted him, "I guess I know why you've come. Gettin' scared, hey?"

He led Neil into the kitchen and they sat down near the big range, for the night air was cold. Mrs. Lowery, a tired, work-worn slattern, was washing the dishes. She ignored Neil. She was thought by most people to be "queer." Her face had once, perhaps, been pretty; now it expressed only a kind of dumb, animal hopelessness.

"Yes, sir," said Lowery, filling his pipe. "It's just the way I figgered it. She may drop as much as thirty cents. And then, boy, watch her climb—swoosh! Just like that!" And he swept his arm towards the ceiling.

"You don't think there's any connection between the slump in wheat and what's going on in the New York stock exchange?" said Neil.

Lowery leaned forward and tapped Neil on the knee. "Listen, Neil, don't get to complicatin' things. When you get to complicatin' things you get all mixed up and lose your nerve. You can't see the woods for the trees, or maybe it's the other way round. I always say, stick to the fundamentals. Now what's fundamental in the wheat business? Demand, Neil, demand! O.K. Europe wants our wheat. All this local jugglin' can't obscure that fundamental fact. And so long as there's demand, the price has got to go up. That's a fundamental law of economics, Neil, a fundamental law of economics."

He sat back in his chair and lit his pipe. "Get out if you like, Neil," he said. "Get out and take your loss. Me, I'm stayin' in."

Neil returned home comforted. Lowery, he felt, was not merely an optimist. He was a man of shrewd common-sense, wise in the ways and tricks of his fellow men. Not even the telegram from his broker asking for more margin, which was phoned out to him next morning, upset him unduly. He wired another two thousand dollars, thereby cleaning out his bank

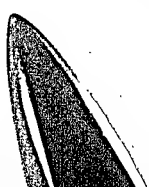
reserve, and listened hopefully to the market quotations on the noon broadcast.

The price of wheat dropped seven cents. Neil had another wire from his broker, and in a panic drove to town and hurried to the bank. Mr. Telfer, the manager, saw him after some delay. Telfer had aged ten years since Neil had last seen him; his face, usually ruddy, was drawn and haggard and his eyes were bloodshot. He listened impatiently to Neil's stumbling request for a loan of three thousand dollars. "So you've been playing the market on margin, have you? I'm sorry, Neil, but it's no dice. The bottom has dropped out of everything. Half the town has been in during the past week looking for money. My advice to you is to take your losses and get out as fast as you can."

Neil stood looking at the manager in dumb misery. Suddenly Telfer's voice rose in an hysterical shriek. "You bloody fool! Get out of my office!"

Neil left the office and drove home. He did not dare listen to the radio next morning. But before the day was over he got a wire from his broker. After hearing it he went out and worked all afternoon repairing a fence that no longer served any purpose since there was no livestock on the farm. He could not bring himself to making calculations on paper, but there was no need. He knew, pretty accurately, what he had lost—ten thousand dollars in cash, twelve thousand dollars in paper profits, and all his land except Uncle Matt's original three hundred and twenty acres.

But at least he could count himself fortunate by comparison with some of his fellows. That night Mr. Telfer remained behind in his office in the bank and blew his brains out. Jim Lowery, after drinking half a bottle of straight rye whisky, hanged himself from a beam in the loft of his barn. People said it was the only time in his life that he did anything that pleased his wife.





BOOK THREE
Years of the Locust





Chapter One

NEIL SAT ON A BENCH in the waiting-room of the Calgary bus station, staring at the opposite wall. The wall was gaudy with posters promising rest and relaxation and romance in far-away places, easily accessible by bus. But Neil did not see the posters. He was engaged in furious mental computation, subtracting the cost of a bus ticket to Vancouver from the sum of money he had in his pocket. The result was unsatisfactory. Perhaps he had better stay where he was. From what he had recently heard, Vancouver was not a good town in which to be broke. The handouts were hard to come by and the cops discouraged sleeping in the park.

After a while he got up and went outside into the hard glare of September sunshine. He walked down the street until he came to a point where he could see, far away to the west, snow-capped peaks sparkling in the light of the morning sun. As always, the mountains drew him with urgent insistence; but for once his common sense asserted itself. It would be folly to start for the coast with only a few dollars cash reserve. Better to work a few weeks longer and make a little stake. After all, it did not really matter if he went today or tomorrow or three months hence. The mountains would always be there.

He retraced his steps, crossed over to Eighth Avenue and continued walking until he came to the Government Employment Office. He did not like the office; the atmosphere of the big waiting-room was too suggestive of human misery and hopelessness. But today the waiting-room was almost empty. It was harvest-time, and for three or four weeks longer there would be jobs for all, or nearly all, who were willing to work twelve hours a day for a dollar and keep. Neil consulted the notices on the bulletin board. Most of them had to do with harvest employment. But Neil did not want to stook any more. He had just

completed a three weeks' grind in the wheat fields north of Calgary; anything, he felt, would be preferable to the monotony of endless days among endless rows of sheaves under a hot autumn sun. He wanted a job in the city. But there were no jobs in the city to be found.

He was just turning away in disgust when a small printed notice under a downtown address caught his eye. "Wanted: Six hundred able-bodied men for patriotic and remunerative work. Apply any time at the above address." Neil studied the notice with mild interest. Almost certainly it had reference to some large-scale harvesting operation, although he could not see that harvesting was either remunerative or patriotic. He decided to check on the advertisement. He had nothing much to do and it would be a good way to pass an hour.

He dropped in at a Chinese restaurant for a cup of coffee, then walked slowly along the street to the address given in the advertisement. The office was on the fourth floor of a downtown business block. A small printed notice on the door said "Knock and walk in." Neil rapped once, opened the door and stepped inside. The office was small and dingy, and gave the impression of having been sealed up for a long time. A man was sitting behind a desk, a typewriter and stack of papers in front of him. He was a stout man with a wide pale face and thin black hair plastered back over his scalp. He motioned Neil to a seat, then leaned forward, pudgy finger-tips together.

"Yes, sir. And what can we do for you?"

"I saw your ad on the board in the employment office. I thought I'd drop around and find out what it was all about."

The man behind the desk nodded and smiled. "Quite a few people have dropped around to find out." He held out a package of cigarettes. "Smoke?"

Neil took a cigarette. He felt uneasy, suspicious. Employers nowadays didn't have to waste cigarettes that way. But he lit the cigarette and leaning back in his chair inhaled deeply.

"What's your name?"

"Fraser. Neil Fraser."

The other nodded and his smile grew broader. "A fine old Anglo-Saxon name. That's what we're looking for."

Suddenly his manner became confidential, "Excuse me, Mr.

Fraser, but you look and talk like an educated man. Would you mind telling me why you're looking for a job?"

"That's easy," Neil said. "Because I need money." He looked out of the window and across the hills at the distant mountain peaks. "I used to farm up north, but I played the wheat market two years ago and got caught. What land I saved is rented now, but there won't be any returns from it this year. Not with wheat at fifty cents a bushel."

The man behind the desk seemed satisfied. He leaned back in his swivel chair and hooked his fingers inside the armholes of his waistcoat. "I'm sorry for you, Mr. Fraser, very sorry indeed. But your misfortune may be our good luck. You're the kind of man we need. You're a citizen, a landowner, an educated man and a Britisher. Now you know as well as I do that the difficulties we are encountering here in the West today are due not so much to a falling off of markets as to industrial uncertainty and unrest. It is not too much to say, Mr. Fraser, that industrial unrest is threatening to undermine and corrode the whole fabric of our social structure."

The wild confusion of metaphors brought the trace of a grin to Neil's lips. "Go on," he said. "You make everything so clear."

The other hesitated and looked hard at Neil. "I'm glad that you agree with me, Mr. Fraser. You will also agree that labour unrest originates not from within the ranks of labour but is being deliberately fomented from without. That it is, in short, being deliberately encouraged by an alien power which seeks to destroy our way of life. And until that unrest is stifled, until industry is once more firmly established on a sound basis, agriculture cannot possibly flourish."

"Listen, mister," said Neil impatiently, "what are you leading up to, anyway?"

"Just this, Mr. Fraser. I and my associates are organizing a militant force to fight against and destroy utterly the forces of Communism and barbarism that are rampant in the West today!"

Neil was startled. "What's the idea? Going to organize a posse of vigilantes and lynch a few Reds?"

The man at the desk smiled a thin smile. "Your idea has



much to commend it, Mr. Fraser. Unfortunately our society is not yet sufficiently enlightened to tolerate such a direct method of approach. What we are doing is organizing the Defence League of Canada. Our purpose is to enlist in the ranks of the League at least six hundred able-bodied men, all Anglo-Saxons or at least loyal to Anglo-Saxon ideals, all citizens of Canada and the Empire."

Neil got up. "I thought you were advertising jobs."

"We are. Jobs at double going wages."

Neil sat down again. "All right, I'm listening. Let's get down to business. What's the job?"

"Just this. Ten days ago, as a result of Communist agitation, the miners in the Southern Saskatchewan coal belt went on strike. Those miners were well paid, well looked after by the various companies. But the mines, with one or two exceptions, are shut down tight. Western Canadian industry is being crippled. It will be the Defence League's first job, a patriotic undertaking, to start the mines in operation again."

Neil was silent. The man at the desk went on, "It is for the sake of the miners themselves as much as the public that we are preparing to re-open the mines. Most of the men are splendid chaps at heart, but they are ignorant central Europeans who are easy prey to crack-pot philosophies. If we can show them the futility of all this Communist-inspired agitation—we have evidence, by the way, that the agitators are being financed directly from Moscow—they will go back to work. For the sake of their wives and families they must be saved from fanatical leaders who are using them as an instrument of nation-wide revolution."

"And if they do go back to work? What happens to the Defence Leaguers then?"

"Naturally not all of the strikers will be taken back. Examples must be made, I'm afraid."

Neil nodded. "O.K.," he said. "I'm your man. When do we start?"

"There's a detachment of the League leaving in an hour. Free transportation to the mines, best of food, best of accommodation. Double wages and a bonus as soon as the mines are

again in operation. Here's your card. The League has a booth at the station. Show your card to the man in charge."

He held out his hand, but Neil did not see it. He put the card inside his wallet and went slowly downstairs.

Later that morning he sat in the day-coach of a train that jolted east across the plains of Alberta. The coach was filled with newly recruited members of the League, all of them, like Neil, men desperately in need of work, caring little where they were going or what awaited them at the end of their journey. There was a Defence League executive somewhere on the train; he rode in a private compartment up ahead. Once or twice he appeared in the day-coach, and smiled expansively while he walked the length of the aisle and back again. The Leaguers were glum and silent in his presence, but they accepted with alacrity the packages of cigarettes which he distributed.

Neil felt no inclination to talk with any of his fellow passengers. He rarely did when travelling. He liked to watch the passing landscape, no matter how dull it might appear to casual observation. The prairie scene had for Neil something of the fascination that the sea holds for those who live close to it; a fascination not to be explained in terms of particular objects or contours or shades of colour, but of an harmonious combination of elements undiminished by detail, awe-inspiring in its colossal monotony. The plain over which the train was now passing stretched grey and golden to the horizon; the wheat fields were studded with stooks, for it was a good harvest year, and everywhere the big grain separators were blasting gouts of straw into great piles on the stubble fields and spilling the yellow wheat down long spouts into waiting wagons and trucks.

This year the crops were heavy in Pine Creek, too." Neil had heard from Johnny Watson, to whom he had rented the farm two years ago at a flat rate of five hundred dollars a year. But it was clear from what Johnny said that there would be no payment this fall: "I figure the wheat won't grade better than three, maybe three tough, because we've had an awful lot of rain this fall. That means I'll get about thirty cents a bushel. When you take off cost of threshing, seed, twine, taxes and things like that, I guess I'll go in the hole about ten cents a bushel. We had another baby in the spring and what with one thing and another

the going is pretty tough right now. Of course, things will pick up pretty soon and I'll pay you six per cent. on your money. But in the meantime . . ."

Tough, all right. And there were thousands like Johnny all over the West. Thousands who thought that the demand for wheat was something like the air and the sun and the earth itself—something that changed a little from day to day and season to season, but was ever present, always dependable. But now, nobody wanted wheat. And when the farmer, in response to urgings from press and politicians, started to raise pigs and cattle, the price of bacon and beef fell to the lowest level in a generation. All hope of ease and comfort and security had vanished in the reality of the struggle for mere existence.

The minefields lay in the middle of a flat, arid plain, several miles from town. The Defence Leaguers piled into waiting trucks and soon they were jolting over rough roads towards the mines. Neil sat on the bottom of a truck, crowded up against a little man who chewed tobacco incessantly and smelt of garlic. He told Neil that his name was Pete Janneke and that he came from the coalfields in the mountains west of Calgary.

"Any idea what we're supposed to do when we get to the mines?" Neil asked him.

"Me, I know, all right," Janneke said. "I done this sort of thing before. But it ain't goin' to be so easy this time. The boys at the mines is organized. Thing to do is not to take it too serious. When the cops try to run us through the picket lines, don't be in a hurry. If anyone takes a pass at you, just lay down. That way you don't get hurt and, besides, you don't get nothin' done, so you're kept on the pay-roll. The dough's good while it lasts. So's the grub." He bared his yellow, broken fangs in an ugly grin. "Me, I'm leavin' the fightin' to the cops. That's what they're paid for."

Neil was uneasy. He had deliberately avoided thinking of the kind of job for which he had been engaged; and it had not occurred to him that he might be used to help break a picket line. Janneke's advice seemed sound. If there was trouble he would lie down at the first opportunity.

But late that evening, when he and his fellow Defence Leaguers, fifty all told instead of six hundred, marched under police escort

to the first of the mines that were to be re-opened, he was not so sure that he would lie down. On the way to the mine they were harassed by women and small boys--women in tattered cotton dresses, and children who were dirty and pasty-faced and old for their years. He did not like the words they used; and still less did he like the stone that hit him just above the eye, almost blinding him. And there was trouble ahead. The pickets were unexpectedly strong, and they were being steadily reinforced. By the time the Leaguers reached the boundary of the mine property, nearly two hundred men in a truculent mood were milling about in front of them. Their obscene insults, the jeering cry of "Scab! Scab!" fired something in Neil's blood. He looked at the dark angry faces of the men in the picket line--faces scarred and brutalized and savage, and his fist clenched. "I'd like to see them try to stop us," he muttered to Pete Janneke, who was making himself as small as possible at Neil's side.

"O.K., O.K., buddie," said Janneke hurriedly. "Go ahead and get your gizzard cut out if that's the way you feel. Me, I'm layin' down. Let the cops do the fightin'. That's their business."

The police escort was strong. Neil counted at least twelve khaki-clad figures, all heavily armed. They stood now in a line between the strike-breakers and the pickets. There was a curious quality of inhuman detachment about them; they were like automatons moving blindly in obedience to controls from some far-away source, moving unquestioningly for good or ill, so it be in the name of the law.

Neil had marched to the mine near the tail-end of the procession of strike-breakers. Now he found to his astonishment that Janneke had disappeared and that he was in the front line, directly behind the shoulders of a burly policeman. So that, when the rush came, he was one of the first to go down. He was bowled over when someone caught him off balance, and he landed flat on his back, unhurt. He rolled over and got to his hands and knees; then a hobnailed boot drove the wind from his body and he sprawled forward on his face. Above him, far away, he heard wild yells, the thud of blows and once a shrill, high-pitched scream of pain. He tried to get up, vomited, and

dropped back to his knees. Then he felt a terrific blow on the back of his head and fell forward into a whirling maze of lights. From some remote distance he heard a voice calling, "Lay off him, boys." And a hand caught him by the shoulder and shook him violently.

The lights ceased to whirl. The voice was loud now, and close at hand. "Neil! Neil Fraser!"

Neil opened his eyes and looked up into the face above him.

"Hello, Gil," he said.

Chapter Two

NEIL SAT in a broken-sprung armchair in Gil Reardon's room and held a wet cloth to his aching head. Gil was moving about the room preparing a meal. "Haven't had anything to eat since noon," he explained. "Now it's after midnight."

He poured a cup of black coffee from a battered percolator and set it on an up-turned apple-box beside Neil's chair. "Here," he said, "pour this into you. There's an aspirin in the saucer. It'll help, too."

He went back to the table and sat down. He opened a tin of sardines, spread the sardines on a thick slice of buttered bread, and began to eat ravenously. "Too bad you had to be slapped down," he said between mouthfuls. "But you had it coming to you."

Gil had changed in four years. He was so thin that his cheek-bones stood out, and his thick black hair had begun to recede at the temples. There was a feverish glitter in his eyes, emphasized by the contrasting dark circles under them, and while he talked he gestured almost continuously with his hands.

Neil gulped a mouthful of coffee. "Easy for you to talk, Gil," he said. "I need dough."

"So do a lot of other people," said Gil. "You don't help them—or yourself—by playing scab."

Neil was stirred to protest. "I'm not a scab. I'm just a guy looking for work."

Gil stared at him with a kind of cold contempt in his eyes. "You're a sucker, Neil. You always were. I suppose you've kidded yourself into thinking that you've come here to do your patriotic duty?"

"No," Neil said. "I may be dumb, but not that dumb. All the same, the organizers of the strike *are* Reds, aren't they?"

"If a man is a Red because he demands a decent living standard and humane treatment for himself and his fellow men, you're right. If he's a Red because he objects to being exploited and cheated by blood-suckers who fatten on his misery, you're right!" Gil's voice rose, and he thumped on the table with his fist.

Neil looked at him in astonishment. "You're one of the organizers?"

Gil nodded. "Yes, I'm one of the Red agitators you've heard so much about—a sinister undercover representative of a godless alien power!" His lips twisted, and he laughed softly.

"I worked here for eighteen months. Six weeks ago they fired me because I tried to help organize a union. The technical charge on which I was thrown out was that of subversive anti-democratic activities. Since then I've lived here. The Chinaman who owns the restaurant below is a good friend of mine. And things have moved—in spite of the owners. The union is organized. The owners won't recognize the union, of course, but we'll lick them. And our demands, Neil, are just. They've got nothing to do with politics. They're demands for the things every human being has a right to."

"Sounds fine," Neil protested, "but in these times you've got to accept smaller wages. There just isn't the money in circulation. We're all in the same boat."

"This isn't a strike for higher wages," Gil said. "I guess you haven't tried very hard to find out what it's all about."

"I still can't see that a man on a regular salary has any gripe," Neil insisted. "Not in times like these."

Gil's face was white. "Maybe I should tell you a few things, Neil. But it wouldn't be much use. Like I've said, you always were a sucker." But he went on talking, and as he talked his voice rose steadily until at the end he was almost shouting. "Sure, the men get regular wages, except during lay-offs when they don't get a red cent. And they spend those wages at the company stores, where they pay from twenty to fifty per cent. more for their grub than they'd pay at any store in town. Only, if they buy their groceries anywhere except from the company stores, they get fired. And they live in rotten houses belonging to the company and they pay nearly twice as much as the going

rents. Sure they get wages—but the company gets the money back. They have us by the short hairs, Neil. The men are just like so many animals and nobody cares a hoot in hell. And it's fools like you who make it just about impossible for us to do anything about the situation without fighting. There's a lot of bull talked about the pressure of enlightened public opinion. My God, Neil, *you* represent enlightened public opinion! And as far as you're concerned, a lot of Red agitators have stirred up the miners—ignorant central European aliens who should be happy and thankful to have any kind of job—and it's your patriotic duty to smash them down—to help the owners keep them in the hell they've been living in ever since they got caught!"

Neil was angry. "You're a liar, Gil!" he shouted. "You know I wasn't sucked in by all that Defence League rubbish."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I told you. I've got to live. Besides, so long as this industrial unrest and squabbling go on, the whole economy of the West is going to suffer. And unless the price of wheat goes up—"

He broke off. Gil was looking at him, an expression of shocked incredulity on his face. "You know, Neil," he said. "I didn't really believe what I was saying about you. I was just trying to make you see things our way. But you're an even bigger fool than I was making you out to be!"

He rolled a cigarette, lit it, and threw the match stick under the stove. "Neil, the farmer is a great guy. In a lot of ways he's the best guy on earth. But as far as he's concerned, only one thing matters, wheat! As long as there's a market for his wheat he doesn't give a hoot about the industrial worker—doesn't know he exists. But once the bottom drops out of the wheat market, he can be led by the nose by any political racketeer who has a formula for upping the price. It never occurs to him that he and the worker are caught in the same trap. And you're a farmer, Neil. You've got chaff and dust and tractor oil in your blood. There's no market for wheat—and so you swallow a line that wouldn't fool an intelligent six-year-old. Chase all the Reds like me back to Russia—restore the industrial economy—and the price of wheat will go up! And if the miners live on the thin borderline of starvation—if their wives are old at thirty and their kids rickety and half-starved and half-frozen—what's

the difference so long as the Bolshies are driven out and the price of wheat goes up! Neil—you make me sick.”

Neil's head was aching violently. He put the aspirin in his mouth and washed it down with a mouthful of lukewarm coffee. “All right, all right,” he said. “Maybe I don't know what's going on.”

Gil was on his feet now, pacing back and forth across the room. “The Defence League, of course, is just so much eyewash for the public. You're just a bunch of hired strike-breakers—the meanest kind of rats that crawl. And everyone in the League knows it—except you. All they're looking for is a few free meals and a few days' wages. But no one is going to lose any skin. Except you. You're consistent, anyway. Sucker clear through.”

Neil passed a hand across his eyes. “I told you I'd figured out most of the angles for myself, Gil. Before I joined. And, anyway, I heard some of the boys talk on the way over.”

He got up and put his cup on the table. His head still hurt but he was able to think clearly now. “What it boils down to, Gil, is that I'm a selfish heel who doesn't know the score and doesn't care. Maybe that's it. I haven't got anything against Reds. I figure that you're doing a good thing. But I can't get worked up about it. Trouble is, I guess I've been pushed around a lot during the past few years so that I don't seem to care much about things any more. Not the things that matter, anyway. I don't think about much nowadays beyond getting enough to eat and a little spare cash for bumming around. I've covered a lot of ground in the last two years. Down East twice, and all through the States. Mostly riding freights.”

He stared out of the window into the dimly lighted street below. “Funny thing,” he mused. “During all that time I never met a single person who meant anything to me—never met anyone I wanted to see again. Something must have dried up inside me. Or maybe it was never there.”

He turned and looked directly at Gil. “Gil, where's Moira?”

Gil lit another cigarette. “Teaching somewhere up north. I haven't heard from her for over a year.”

“Did you see much of her—after you left Pine Creek?”

“See her?” Gil stared at Neil. Then suddenly he laughed.

“You mean to say you never heard? Come to think of it,

though, there was no reason why you should. Moira was true to her upbringing. We made things all nice and respectable the week after we left. But marriage didn't work out for either of us. So we called quits two years ago."

He was silent for a moment. Neil continued to stand at the window, staring out into the night. Presently Gil spoke again. "Maybe you had something to do with it, Neil. After the first few weeks, anyway."

Neil did not say anything. There were a hundred questions that he wanted to ask but they stuck in his throat. Gil came over and slapped him on the shoulder. "But why rake up the past?" he said. "What matters is now. How about lining up with us in the big parade?"

Neil turned from the window. "What parade?"

"Tomorrow all the miners are marching into town. We're going to hold a mass meeting in the town hall. The council has refused us the use of the hall and the cops will try to stop us marching. But they won't. We'll just roll over them—gently, of course—and we'll hold our meeting. There'll be speeches—a woman from Winnipeg, two union organizers from down East, and yours truly."

Gil laughed self-consciously and went on. "But that's not what matters. The important thing is to show that we *are* organized—that we *are* strong. We've reached the crisis, Neil. The owners are at the breaking point. Last week most of the little fellows were ready to recognize our union. The big shots have bullied them into withdrawing recognition, but it shows the way the wind is blowing. One bang-up demonstration of solidarity—of strength—and everything we're asking for is in the bag!"

"Maybe I'll turn out," Neil said. "I'd like to hear what kind of line you've got."

He sat down again in the armchair, leaned back and closed his eyes. "Do you remember, Gil, the time we went to the dance for Moira? The first time I ever saw her? Five years ago, I guess it was."

Gil was busy putting things away in the cupboard above the dirty sink. "Sure I remember," he said. "Seems a long time ago."

"It was a long time ago," Neil agreed. "But I remember telling you that night that you were the kind of guy who couldn't live without believing in something. You had to have a faith."

"Well?"

"Well, seems you've found it."

Gil did not say anything for a while. He finished putting away the dishes, then sat down at the table and rolled a cigarette. "Maybe you're right," he said slowly. "And it's the finest faith there is. Faith in mankind."

Neil opened his eyes. "Maybe," he said. "But a mighty hard one to hang on to."

Then he closed his eyes again and slept dreamlessly until dawn.

Chapter Three

THE AFTERNOON was a late autumn miracle—cloudless, almost hot, undistinguishable from a midsummer's day save for the faint, indefinable tang in the air and the smell of smoke from burning straw-piles in the threshed grain-fields. Since early morning the miners had been preparing for the march on the town hall; there had been speeches, choruses, wild outbursts of hysterical cheering. Now the march had begun; the miners straggled in a long, irregular column along the dusty road. There were some women among them; and in the rear came a procession of wives and children. The town lay straight ahead, and Neil could distinguish khaki-clad figures on the main street. The automatons of the law were in motion—watchful, waiting, sinister in their inhuman detachment from the reality of the dusty street and the sun-baked, shabby buildings on either side of them.

Neil was near the front of the procession. Just ahead of him walked Gil Reardon. Neil marvelled at the change that had taken place in Gil. Back in Pine Creek he had been brooding, tense, at odds with his environment. Now he was happy, confident, sure of his place in the sun. Neil wondered if he himself would ever find a faith and, if so, would he, too, be transformed? Now he had only opinions about things, and opinions did not matter very much. A man could assume or shed them like a coat. Many men had opinions, but only one in a hundred had a faith. Neil's opinion of the miners had changed in the past twenty-four hours, but he felt no enthusiasm for their cause. Rather, he felt a very great pity for the men themselves. For them, all life was concentrated into the struggle for food and clothing; they lived with the narrow, passionate intensity inevitable in men whose horizons were no farther away than the company office and the company stores,

who lived without thought of the future because today absorbed all their energies and stultified their intellects. They marched steadily forward, desperate men bent on mischief, seeking escape from the trap which held them fast by striking out and breaking something.

There was no need of a meeting in the town hall. The miners could have assembled much more easily in an open field. But the fact that the town was hostile, that the police had forbidden the parade, strengthened their determination. Their leaders had told them that they were being confined like animals beyond the limits within which respectable people moved; they were being denied the right to hold a peaceful parade and demonstration. Now, if ever, a demonstration of unity and strength was essential. Above all, strength. Meek^d acceptance of tyrannical decrees meant defeat and extinction.

But Neil knew that, on another level, what he was witnessing was an infinitesimal part of a struggle which encompassed all humanity. The handful of Saskatchewan miners, ill-clothed, ill-fed, mostly illiterate, with no comprehension of the real issues at stake, were moving blindly in response to a law of nature which impels man to fight his shackles as a wolf fights the trap which holds him. The procession now moving into the town would create no stir beyond the limits of the town itself; there would be a parade down the main street, a scuffle, perhaps, with the police, a few stones thrown, speeches, and the long march back. It would be an aimless, futile, exhausting exercise, fit object of derision—and yet, on that other level, something enormously significant. For it would be no less than a manifestation of an age-old truth working towards one or the other of the alternatives which it posed—that man be free or perish.

So Neil mused as he shuffled along the dusty road—tired, thirsty, half-ashamed, yet held fast by the drama of the action of which he was a fragmentary part. And up in front Gil Reardon stepped forward proudly and the men followed, with a deliberation and a purposefulness that was charged with menace.


They reached the main street of the town, a long wide street running between low buildings of brick and wood. A line of policemen stretched across the width of the street directly in the miners' path. One of the policemen stepped forward and

said something. But his words were lost in a wave of cheering that rose from the advancing men. The orderly procession began to lose shape. The men in front hesitated; those behind closed up and the mass spread out across the width of the street. A rock hurtled through the air and hit a policeman in the face. He dropped to his knees, scrambled up again quickly, and drew the back of his hand across his bleeding cheek. His expression was one of horrified surprise. Then a voice rose, high and shrill, "Let's get 'em, gang!" and the miners rushed forward.

What followed had for Neil the reality and haunting terror of a nightmare. All around men were shouting, spreading out, rushing forward. The police gave way. They retreated down the street, but they still held their line. There was no disorder in their ranks, no hint of wavering. Neil caught the glint of sunlight on a revolver barrel, but there was no shooting. The police faced their tormentors—faced a barrage of stones, bottles, broken bricks—anything that could be thrown and could maim. There was blood on several faces now; and one corporal held a broken left wrist in his right hand and stared straight ahead through eyes blurred with pain.

The wash of the crowd flowed up onto the sidewalks. Panic-stricken faces peered out from behind plate-glass windows, the faces of respectable citizens who had occupied ringside seats to see the miners routed. A husky Ukrainian swung a baseball bat and a window flew inwards with a shattering crash. There was a scream of terror from inside, and the faces that had been visible a moment before disappeared.

A fire-truck came clanging down the street. A stream of water rose in a high, curving arc, dropped, and struck squarely in the faces of the oncoming miners. One man went down as if hit by an axe; he rolled over and over, his fingers clawing for a hold in the hard-packed dirt of the street. The stream of water wavered, shot sideways, then straight up in the air. Men were fighting around the fire-engine. A fireman drove his fist into a miner's face; the two men closed, fell and rolled under the truck. The miner battered his opponent unmercifully and his comrades swarmed over the truck. Then the centre of action swayed away from the fire-engine, diffused itself across the street, and there was a brief lull.



The miners had advanced over half the length of the street towards the town hall. Their trail was marked by broken glass from windows and street lamps, and the debris which had served them as weapons to drive back the police. Three policemen were bleeding profusely, and a fireman lay stretched under the fire-truck, battered into unconsciousness. A miner sitting on the truck lifted his voice in a hoarse whoop of defiance. "Come on, Joe," someone called to him. "Git down offa there and start pitchin'!"

Joe jumped off the fire-truck and ran forward. A revolver cracked, and there was a moment of startled silence. Then Gil Reardon's voice rose in a shout. "Come on, boys, march!" The miners swarmed around him. They roared defiance at the police, screamed obscene oaths. And they went forward, faster now and with a semblance of order in their ranks.

The police retreated, firing over the heads of the oncoming miners as they went. Neil could see sweat streaming down the face of a young constable directly in front of him. The constable held his revolver at an angle of forty-five degrees and at regular intervals pressed the trigger. Once he lowered the revolver to reload. His face was expressionless but his eyes were staring, tormented, dangerous.

The miners closed in on the town hall. Two policemen stood on the front steps, the others formed a rough semicircle that encompassed the front of the building. The miners swarmed around the hall and the man called Joe yelled shrilly, "Give it to 'em, boys—give it to 'em!" He picked up a jagged piece of rock and threw it at one of the policemen on the steps. It struck the policeman in the groin and he doubled up in agony, his revolver clattering from his fingers down the steps. A roar, terrifying in its sheer animalism, went up from the miners. They stormed over the low railings around the hall and the air was full of flying missiles. A policeman fell and did not get up again. The semicircle lost all semblance of shape as it was driven inwards, and flattened by the head-on assault.

A long black car came down a side street, stopped with a screaming of brakes and spilled a stream of men in khaki onto the sidewalk. The reinforcements carried rifles. An order

rang out—shrill, high-pitched, inhuman—and the air was filled with the crash of exploding bullets.

The man called Joe pivoted slowly on his heels until he was facing his companions. There was a look of anguished surprise on his sweating, dirt-smeared face; then he fell to the ground and lay there kicking convulsively. Blood was spurting from his mouth, and he tore up the grass with clawing fingers. Another volley crashed out; Neil turned and began to run. Men were running all around him; running blindly, desperately, anywhere to escape from the death that whined about their ears. Someone tripped and Neil fell sprawling over the outstretched body. He was momentarily stunned, and sat up holding his head. The police were pursuing; they were clubbing savagely with their revolvers, and one burly constable was holding his rifle by the barrel and swinging it like a baseball bat.

Only Gil Reardon held his ground. He faced the advancing police alone; then he turned and waved his arm in a frantic beckoning gesture. "Fight, boys—for God's sake, fight!"

A rifle cracked. Gil seemed to hesitate, took a single step sideways and fell to the ground. Neil got to his feet and ran forward. From somewhere far away he heard a woman's voice, high-pitched and hysterical, "You murderers—you bloody murderers!" He slid his arm around Gil's shoulder, tried to lift him. But Gil's head fell back and he did not move. There was blood on his face, blood on his lips, blood all over the front of his white shirt. Then Neil knew that Gil was dead, and anger such as he had never known gripped him and he flung himself wildly on the policeman who was striking at him with the butt of his revolver. They rolled over and over on the ground and some of the miners gathered around them and again the rifles cracked. Neil smashed an elbow into the face of the man underneath—then his clutching fingers fastened around a stone and he raised it above his head. But even as he did so he caught a glimpse of the policeman's face, the face of a terror-stricken, bewildered boy; and it came to him in an inexplicable flash of intuition that between miner and policeman there was no difference; both were caught in the same trap.

The stone dropped from his hand. He rolled over, got up and ran. And the miners ran with him. Janneke, the strike-

breaker, caught somehow in the maelstrom, ran a step or two ahead, his breath coming in wheezy gasps. Suddenly he stumbled and fell. Neil helped him to his feet. Janneke's jaw had been smashed by a bullet; splinters of bone showed through the torn flesh and Janneke was screaming in a high, unwavering note. And the police pursued, slashing, striking, in a blind, uncontrolled fury.

Neil helped Janneke into the doorway of a restaurant. The door was locked but Neil threw himself against it and it flew inwards with a splintering crash. He carried Janneke inside and laid him on the floor. From behind the counter a figure, huge, menacing, lunged at him. "Take that skunk outa here!"

Neil caught up a heavy candy jar that stood on the counter, swung it above his head and smashed it at the face in front of him. The man reeled back against the wall and slid to the floor amid the crash of falling bottles and tin cans. Men rushed out from the back of the restaurant; one of them held a meat cleaver in his hands, but he made no move towards Neil. Neil heard a hoarse shout from the doorway. He sprang towards the men who had come from the kitchen, and they gave way, letting him pass. He rushed through the swing doors into the kitchen as a bullet splintered the wood beside him, and out through the back door into a lane. He ran until the blood was pounding in his ears and his legs were like lumps of lead. Then he rolled into a roadside ditch and slid off into a borderland between sleep and tormented semi-consciousness—a borderland where in confused progression there passed endlessly through his mind blurred images of khaki-clad figures, of a fire-hose spraying water in a wide arc, of men running—and clear and distinct, etched in blood, Gil Reardon on his back, arms flung wide, staring up at the pale blue sky with eyes from which the light had forever departed.

Chapter Four

UPON THE LAND the grip of winter had fastened itself, not harshly yet, but with a kind of inexorable finality. The sun shone brightly, but its heat was not sufficient to counteract the wind which blew chillingly across the prairies from the north-west. A little snow had fallen the night before and still showed in ridges along the edges of the ditches. Neil, hunched upon an uncomfortable leather seat in the smoker of the train, stared out through the smoke-grimed window across dreary fields of summer-fallow and stubble. But today he saw nothing of the unchanging landscape. Instead, through his mind passed a slow procession of scenes reaching farther and farther back into youth and childhood and beyond—scenes that helped to make up the jumble that was his life. He had heard and read many times of the pattern of man's existence. But for him, pattern was a word without meaning, except in mockery. Life so far had been a series of seemingly unrelated episodes and nothing more. Some people and many things had loomed large in their time and place, but they did not seem to bear relationship to anything beyond those limits. People like Charlie Steele and Helen Martell, once the idols of his boyish daydreams—strong, beautiful and proud—a man and a woman who had coloured his life and given it splendour. Now, in retrospect, they had shrunk to the limits of ordinary flesh and blood—a man and a woman trapped by their own passions and the forces of society, the one destroyed utterly, the other left unhappy and alone. People like Uncle Matt and Aunt Em, once the rocks on which his life had been anchored, dead long ago, it seemed, and no more important than a transient snowflake on the window-pane. They had not affected his way of life, they had given his soul no bent. They had clothed him and fed him and let him alone. Beyond that they had no meaning, no relevance to what had

happened to him. He thought, with curious anguish, of Gil Reardon, who had meant so much in the past, and lately so little. Gil Reardon who, like Charlie Steele, had once symbolized that which lay beyond the limits of commonplace reality, and who was now, like Charlie Steele, a broken lump of clay. So many men and women had lived and died and what they did or how they died had no force or meaning beyond the petty circle within which their lives had moved.

It was not even possible to find a coherent pattern in character itself. Gil Reardon, who of all Neil's acquaintances had seemed the shrewdest and most practical, the "most likely to succeed" in a material sense, had died for a fantastic ideal, a meaningless cliché—the freedom of mankind. His behaviour was less—or more—than human. It was irrational, without real significance.

But while Neil was groping in his mind to find rationality where none seemed to exist, in his heart he envied Gil Reardon, because Gil had had a faith. Without a faith he knew that the kind of happiness he craved, the kind that he had known fleetingly years before, would continue to elude him. Long ago, whenever he read Conrad or Rupert Brooke, he had felt that life had meaning. He had loved to mouth the words of Brooke:

These laid the world away, poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth, gave up the years to be
Of hope and joy. . . .

because in those days there had been things to live for, things that made dying worth while. But now neither life nor death mattered at all. And because they did not matter, Neil was filled with a kind of sick despair.

The train stopped with a shuddering jerk. Neil took his club bag from the rack and climbed down the smoker's steps to the narrow wooden platform below. The sun was nearly set now and the wind blew strong and cold. Neil shivered, turned up the collar of his thin overcoat and walked up the cinder path from the station to the frame hotel on the nearest corner. He registered, paid his money in advance and went up to a dingy room on the second floor. He washed himself carefully in

the cracked earthenware basin that stood on the wash-stand in one corner of the room, brushed the dust from his clothes with a whisk that he took out of his club bag, and returned to the lobby. The lean, unshaven proprietor of the hotel was still behind the desk, studying the fly-specked register without interest.

"Can you tell me the way to the Golden Vale School?"

"Three miles straight east and a mile south. Can't miss it."

Neil thanked the proprietor and went out. He had something to eat at the Chinese restaurant half-way up the street, and lingered over a second cup of strong black coffee. Although he was tingling all over with a strange excitement, he was in no hurry to set out. When he finally left the restaurant and started east along the gravelled highway, a big yellow moon had risen above the horizon and the sky was pin-pointed with stars. He walked quickly, head bent forward. After a while he left the gravelled surface because it hurt his feet and walked in the dry ditch alongside the road. Once he stopped and, sitting at the edge of the ditch, rolled and smoked a cigarette. The wind had died down to a faint, almost impalpable breath and the night was still. Once he heard wagon wheels in the distance, sounding faint and lonely; and once a truck whizzed past on the highway going west. There were no other sounds to destroy the illusion that he was a solitary human being in the midst of a vast plain.

He went on, and the darkness lay around him like a semi-transparent screen, concealing harsh and petty details, revealing only the grand, sweeping lines of road and fence and horizon. It was a time that Neil always enjoyed with a peculiar pleasure—the crisp tang in the air, the moon silvering the grass, the stars suspended far overhead in the arching purple vault of the sky, and the silence and the sense of aloneness. But tonight his mood was not attuned to his environment. He was tense, almost frightened now, and he hurried forward at a faster pace lest his courage fail him before the moment of crisis arrived.

He counted the road allowances until he had covered three miles, then turned south and followed a rutted trail that ran between barbed wire fences. In the distance he could see a light burning dimly. Soon he was able to distinguish the outline of the schoolhouse rising gaunt and bare from the gaunt, bare

plain. The teacherage lay in its shadow, and from the window of the teacherage a thin stream of light flowed out between blind and frame. Neil opened the little iron gate leading into the schoolyard. For a moment he hesitated, then with a sudden gesture of decision, shut the gate and walked along the narrow pathway running around a corner of the school to the door of the teacherage.

He knocked once, gently, and stepping to one side stood close against the wall as if seeking its protection. There was no sound from within. He waited a long time. Then he knocked again and this time the loudness of his knock startled him. Footsteps sounded inside. The door opened a few inches and a voice spoke. "Who's there?"

Neil stepped forward so that the light streaming from the door fell directly on his face. "Hello, Moira," he said.

There was a sudden startled gasp from the girl standing in the doorway. For a moment she seemed to hesitate, then she threw the door wide open. "Come in, Neil," she said.

He stepped across the threshold into the pool of light that fell from the lamp on the table. For a minute he did not speak, only stood there fighting to gain control of himself. Moira had closed the door and was standing with her back to it. She spoke in a voice that was low and troubled. "It was good of you to come."

"When did you hear?"

"The day after it happened."

She moved towards the centre of the room and pointed to a pile of newspapers lying on top of a small corner table. The two-inch, red-lettered headline of the uppermost page caught Neil's eye: "Miners Subdued: Two Dead." He cleared his throat, spoke stutteringly. "I was with him. He died in my arms."

The words sounded hollow, melodramatic. Moira pushed forward a chair. Neil sat down and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He did not know what to say. And Moira was waiting. "I thought that—perhaps—you—" he stumbled on.

"It's good of you, Neil," she repeated. Then she added, irrelevantly it seemed, "I've just finished supper. There's lots of coffee in the pot. Have some?"

They sat at the table and drank their coffee and by degrees things became easier. As they talked—about the weather and the hard times and school-teaching in the country—Neil furtively studied the girl sitting across from him. He had not seen Moira for over three years; she had changed very little, and yet the changes were somehow immensely significant. Her hair no longer sparkled in the lamplight as it used to do; and there were tiny lines around her eyes. Her mouth, without make-up, seemed thinner, harder than he remembered. She was dressed carelessly, in some kind of wrap-around garment that was shapeless and a bit crumpled. Suddenly she laughed, a trifle self-consciously. "You know, Neil, I wasn't expecting visitors."

Neil flushed. "Sorry, Moira," he said. "It's just that I haven't seen you for so long."

"Have I changed much?"

"I don't know. I think so."

Moira refilled his cup. Her hand shook slightly as she held the coffee pot. "I think so, too," she said.

She sat down again and drew her cup towards her. "Tell me about yourself," she said.

"That's what you said to me the first time I ever met you."

He was sorry the moment he spoke, but Moira seemed to welcome the opening. "It all happened so long ago," she said. "You sat in a corner all evening and tried to look aloof and far away. And I danced mostly with Gil and looked at you over his shoulder. And when I talked to you, you were frightened—like a small boy. But you were pleased, too. And I was happy. It was a lovely evening. I don't think I've ever been so happy since."

Neil set his cup down on the table. When he spoke there was an unexpected grating edge in his voice. "Moira, why did you do it?"

For a long time she did not answer. But she was not perturbed by his question. She was thoughtful, perplexed, but unembarrassed. "I don't know, Neil," she said. "No, that's not true. I wanted Gil. That's all. But I don't altogether know why. Partly my own fault—partly yours."

"Mine?" Neil was astonished, incredulous. "I don't think you're being quite fair, Moira. What had I to do with it?"

Moira smiled a slow, strange smile, so unlike the quick flash of laughter of the old days. "What had you to do with it? Oh, Neil, are you ever going to get out of the Middle Ages? You were more to me than Gil was. You always were, I guess. Even afterwards, I thought more about you than I did about Gil. Lots of times, when he made love to me, I wished that he were you. And I think he knew it."

"I still don't see—"

"Neil, a woman likes to be put on a pedestal. But she doesn't want to stay there. Gil knew that. But apparently, you didn't."

Neil was silent, shocked. Presently Moira went on: "And besides, there was something about Gil that I could never figure out. You were transparent from the beginning. But Gil was different. There were things about him that I didn't know. I had to find out."

Neil's voice was hard. "So that's the way it was. I was just the simple country boy. But Gil had unplumbed depths. And you had to plumb them."

"Don't be bitter, Neil. Not now. Yes, I tried to plumb them, if you like. But there was nothing for me. Oh, he was a grand, exciting lover—for a while. But he needed more than a woman to make him happy. And when he found what he wanted, I didn't count any more."

"I didn't believe it." Neil spoke without conviction.

"Don't you, Neil? You were with Gil on the last day of his life. Did he say anything at all about me?"

"It was an anxious time for Gil," Neil explained. "There was no chance for that kind of talk. Organizing the parade—"

Moira shook her head. "You were always a poor bluffer, Neil," she said. "But you needn't try to salve my pride. I had him, and I couldn't keep him. But perhaps I didn't want to. Not really. Because, you see, I couldn't forget you."

Neil pushed back his chair. "Moira," he said, "I wish you'd quit the double talk. You don't make things simpler that way."

"I know, Neil," she said. "But it isn't easy to make things simple. Not where emotions are concerned. Of course, I could tell you that I had never really loved Gil—that I just fell for his physical charm and lost control of myself. That would

be simple enough—but only half true. Because what I did, I did deliberately. And afterwards, everything was so complicated. You came between us—you and Gil's idealism."

He sat silent and grim. Moira poured more coffee for them both. "I've tried as honestly as I know how to tell you how things were—and are. But I can't do it. Everything is a muddle. People love to talk about the simple elemental things of life. They don't exist. Life is never simple. Neither are emotions."

She broke off. When she spoke again her tone was self-consciously chatty. "Now tell me all about yourself."

Neil drank his coffee in nervous gulps and lit a cigarette. "There isn't much to tell. I was a flop at college—a flop at farming. So I rented the farm and saw the world. Or as much of it as I could see from the top of a box-car. I'm just a bum, Moira—no roots, no ambition any more. Everything I ever believed in, everything I ever idealized, has gone sour on me. I've hit my level and I'll stay there. I just don't seem to care about things any more."

"Why did you come to see me?"

Neil laughed shortly. "I don't know. Curiosity, perhaps. Or I may have hoped that an ideal could be revived—"

"And the tarnish removed?" Moira smiled again, her slow strange smile. "Neil, why don't you try living in the real world for a while? It's more honest—and more heroic. And you wouldn't talk so much like a stuffed shirt."

Neil felt a swift surge of anger. It passed, and he spoke glumly: "Maybe you're right, Moira. But it's pretty late to begin."

"You still have the farm?"

"Sure. And Johnny Watson doesn't want to rent any more. But I couldn't go back to farming."

"Why not?"

"Because I hate farming." There was no vehemence in his voice. He spoke with simple conviction.

"More than riding the rods and being hired and fired and pushed around by employment agencies and the police?"

"You make the choice a hard one, Moira."

"Nothing is easy nowadays."

He got up and, in a clumsy attempt to conceal his agitation, began to put fresh wood in the stove. When he turned around, Moira had left the room. Neil put the coffee cups on a side table and picked up the paper which lay on top of the heap on the corner table. Then he sat down and with rekindled anger in his heart re-read for the tenth time the distorted newspaper account of the march of the miners and the killing that ensued.

Moira came back into the kitchen very quietly. Neil got to his feet. "I guess I'll be on my way, Moira," he said uncomfortably. "Wouldn't do if a member of the school board called and found you entertaining a man."

Moira had changed her dress and was wearing a silk dressing-gown that clung closely to her body. Her lips were a soft crimson and she had done something to her eyes.

"You don't need to go, Neil," she said. "Not unless you want to."

Chapter Five

JOHNNY WATSON met Neil and Moira at the station. He had driven in from the farm with team and sleigh, for it had been snowing hard for three days, so that even the main highway was temporarily impassable for cars. "Holy smokes!" Johnny shouted, whacking Neil hard between the shoulder-blades, "you sure sprung a fast one on us this time! Well, sir, like I always say to the missus, a man don't know when he's happy until he gets married—then it's too late!"

He laughed boisterously and led the way to the waiting sleigh, staggering a little under the load of suitcases he had assumed. "I left a good fire in the heater and stove both. House is pretty well chilled, of course, but the fire's been on since early mornin' so she won't be too bad. And I picked up a few sticks of furniture at the Williams's sale—table, two or three chairs, bed, dishes. Forty dollars' worth altogether. Cost three or four times as much new. You'll be able to get by till you can look round for yourselves."

"Thanks, Johnny," said Neil. "I knew you'd do your best. But I didn't give you much notice."

"No trouble, Neil, no trouble at all. Everybody's tryin' to sell out and get out. There were sales near every day of the week until the snow came."

They piled the luggage into the sleigh and got in beside it. Johnny clucked at the horses and they broke into a shambling trot, the bells on their harness jingling pleasantly. Johnny turned up the collar of his sheepskin coat and grinned at Moira.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Fraser," he said. "We always thought you'd stake a claim in these parts, but we didn't figger you'd wait so long."

"Thanks, Johnny," said Moira. "It's good to be home."

Neil looked at her quickly. But there was no mistaking the

sincerity in her voice. Neil was comforted, and yet perplexed. The return to the farm had for him a peculiarly nightmarish quality; he was doing now what he had vowed two years ago he would never do, he was coming back defeated among the people who knew him best and who had expected much of him; and he was coming back to the kind of life he had grown to hate. He could not understand Moira's almost joyous acceptance of the situation; indeed, it was only at her insistence that they had come back at all. But, then, there was much about Moira that he did not understand.

He was glum and silent nearly all the way home. He heard little of Johnny's inconsequential chatter, for he was pre-occupied with plans for the future, a future that, no matter how he considered it, seemed uniformly drab and depressing. He and Moira were beginning from scratch at a time when market prices were near an all-time low; they had no equipment, no livestock, barely enough furniture to enable them to sit down to their meals and go to bed at night. Their stake consisted of the few hundred dollars that Moira had saved—sufficient, perhaps, to make down payments on a few essential pieces of machinery or buy them second-hand at auction. Neil would have to rely very largely on the generosity of his neighbours in order to get his crop planted in the spring, and he hated to be dependent on charity. And they would be chained to the farm. Before him there stretched the prospect of a dreary round of days in the field, of endless chores, endless jobs around house and barn. Johnny had warned him that the buildings were in bad shape. The kind of life that Neil had always dreamed of—a life of travel, reading, music, writing—had become impossibly remote. And his heart was filled with bitterness. As a child he had hated to surrender his dreams; and in many respects he was a child still.

He looked at Moira curled up on the floor of the sleigh, a buffalo robe wrapped around her legs, and for a moment he was almost happy. But only for a moment. The marvel of living with her had in it so far as much pain as pleasure, and the pleasure was intermittent and uneasy. The moments of savage ecstasy were followed almost invariably, not by release and ultimately satiation, but by moods of bitter depression. Why had Moira

married him? Because she loved him, or because he provided a means of escape, however unreliable, from the drudgery of school-teaching? And if she loved him, could he hold her love? Would not the drab routine of life as a farmer's wife drive her soon to seek refuge somewhere else or with someone else? So he tormented himself until Johnny Watson turned in through the old wire gate—thrown back against the fence now and buried under two feet of snow—and drove into the familiar yard.

And yet not altogether familiar. House and barn seemed smaller—seemed to have shrunk with the passing years. They, too, had aged, aged immeasurably. The paint was all gone from the house now; two windows in front had been broken and Johnny had mended them crudely with pieces of cardboard and strips of black adhesive tape. The gate in the fence around the barnyard sagged on a single broken hinge; and the roof of the barn had settled in the centre, thereby giving the building a curiously fragile appearance. The snow was drifted high in the yard and there were no paths shovelled through it. Only the wisps of grey smoke drifting down from the chimney in a straight line bore a suggestion of life.

"The missus would have come over and had a hot meal ready for you," said Johnny, as he helped Neil with the suitcases, "only, two of the kids are sick. Seems like measles. When you've got five you always got one or two down with something."

"Tell her I'll be over to see her as soon as we've got the place fixed up," Moira said.

"That'll be real nice," Johnny said. "She gets kind of fed up in the winter-time. Don't get out much."

He refused an invitation to stay for a cup of tea and drove off into the grey twilight. Neil lit the old oil lamp, grimy with dust and lamp-black, and set it on the kitchen table that Johnny had bought. "Well," he said, "here we are. Like Johnny said, welcome home."

"You really ought to have carried me across the threshold," Moira said. "But I guess you were shy with Johnny around."

Neil did not return her banter. He stood in the middle of the kitchen and looked about with sinking heart. The oilcloth paper on the wall was stained and spotted and some of the plasterboard had fallen away from the ceiling where the rain had come

through. The linoleum had been sold at the auction sale two years before; now the splintering boards lay naked and ugly, an offence to the eye and a menace to the flesh.

"Not very cheerful, is it?" he said.

"If you'd lived in a teacherage for two years you'd think it was a palace." Moira filled a battered tin kettle with water and put it on the stove. "Now help me carry the suitcases into the bedroom."

Neil moved the suitcases into the downstairs bedroom which adjoined the living-room; then he piled more wood into the stove and more coal into the heater. He thought that if the walls of the living-room were not so repulsively naked the house would be less depressing. Presently he had an inspiration. When he had closed up the house two years before, he had left his personal belongings stowed away in boxes in the attic room; among them were several pictures. He went upstairs, whistling noisily, treading with care on the narrow steps that led to the attic, a smoking oil lamp in his hand.

It was cold in the attic room, cold and musty and desolate. He opened the window, looked out into the grey, melancholy dusk, then turned to the boxes piled on the floor along the opposite wall. Most of the boxes were filled with books. He carried the boxes down, one by one, to the living-room. Moira came out from the bedroom and looked at them with a critical eye. "What are you going to do, Neil?"

"I thought that a few books and pictures would make the place seem a little more homelike," he said rather shamefacedly. "I can fill up these old shelves, and the pictures will cover up the biggest holes."

"You'd better dust the books first."

Moira found a dust-cloth in one of the boxes in the bedroom, gave it to Neil and returned to her unpacking. Neil, his spirits somewhat dampened by her lack of enthusiasm, dusted the books one by one and put them in the open shelves. They were all there—the text-books of his college days, his Swinburne, his Byron, his Conrads, the stack of novels that he had accumulated through the years. He found his manuscripts tied up in thick bundles and he placed them carefully on one of the lower shelves. He would begin writing again soon. Writing and revising.

There would be little else to do on the farm during the winter. He felt that he would be able to write something worth while this time; after all, he had experienced enough living in the past two years to provide him with material for half a dozen novels. Perhaps through writing he would be able to make enough money to equip the farm properly. Or, better still, to escape from it.

In a corner of one of the boxes he found a book carefully wrapped up in newspaper and tied with a piece of strong cord. He took off the covering and a leather-bound copy of the poems of Rupert Brooke lay in his hand. He stood looking at it for a long time. Then Moira called out to him from the bedroom and he quickly slipped the book in among others on the shelf. But Moira came and stood beside him and took the book from the shelf. She opened it at the flyleaf and together they read the inscription: "To Neil, with my love. Moira." She looked up at him with a queer little smile.

"Neil, I meant it. In spite of all that happened since, I still do."

"When you sent it to me," he said, "I was happier than I'd ever been in my life."

Moira turned quickly away and went back to the bedroom. Neil did not follow her. He was busy for a long time arranging and rearranging the books on their shelves and hanging a few brightly coloured reproductions of old masters on the walls. Then he went up to the attic room. It was empty now of everything save a few shelves, and the atmosphere of neglect and desolation was more pronounced than before. He went again to the window, and standing there remembered how years before he had stood in the same place and, hearing the lonely, haunting cry of the coyote, had fled in terror to his bed. And he remembered how he had prayed that night that God would protect him and send his mother to his bedside. Standing there, dreaming of the boy he had been, he smiled to himself in the darkness. It had all happened long, long ago.

He went back downstairs. Moira, her eyes unusually bright, was busy over the kitchen stove. "Johnny laid in a good supply of groceries for us," she said. "There's bacon and eggs—or you can have beans if you like—coffee and condensed milk and

bread and butter and apples and potatoes and oatmeal. I can't find any sugar, but we can manage all right for a day or two. But you'd better go to town tomorrow if you can make it."

"I'll go over to Johnny's in the morning and borrow a team," Neil said. "He's got more horses in the barn than he needs. And maybe he can fix me up with a spare set of sleighs."

They ate their supper at the kitchen table and afterwards Neil helped Moira with the dishes. He spent the rest of the evening repairing shelves in the kitchen, examining the condition of the dugout cellar, and making plans for the future. But he could not shake off the mood of depression which had gripped him most of the day. And when, later, he sat down with Moira to a cup of tea, his mood must have shown in his face, for Moira spoke with unexpected crispness.

"Neil, you've got to snap out of it. Honestly, the only depressing thing about this place is the way you look!"

Neil did not try to conceal his irritation. "I don't see what there is to be a little Pollyanna about," he said. "I've been trying to figure out all afternoon how we're going to live through the winter. It seems to me that if we'd stayed in the city and I'd got a job—"

"But you wouldn't have got a job. You'd have been on the bread-line all winter. That's the way things are. I know I could have kept on teaching, but I haven't had any salary for three months, and the district won't be able to pay me anything for at least a year, and only then if they get a crop and the price of wheat goes up. But we can live through the winter all right, and very well, too. I've made out a budget. Wait a minute."

She went to the bedroom and returned with a little black note-book in her hand. "What I've got in the bank will buy our groceries, what furniture we need, and some clothes for you. I don't need anything new—I've got lots. Then I've got a life insurance policy. If I drop it in the spring, when the next payment comes due, it'll realize a cash value of seven hundred dollars. That'll be enough for down payments on some machinery."

She showed him the figures in her book. Neil looked at them and felt resentful. Moira was so practical—everything down in black and white. "I know you're not much interested, Neil,"

she said, "and I don't get much kick out of trying to make you listen. But you've got to realize that we *can* wiggle through all right if we use our heads, and that we're a lot better off than most of the people in the West. At least we're healthy and we haven't got a load of debt."

"We'll soon fix that," said Neil.

Moira looked at him for a moment in silence. "Neil," she said, "you're the limit. Come on to bed."

Neil banked the fires and laid in supplies of wood and kindling for the morning. And all the time he was thinking how far the reality of marriage was removed from the dream. For in the dream, that romantic vision of his youth, marriage had been surrounded and glorified by an almost Oriental splendour, a splendour without definition, but made up of elements like intoxicating perfumes, the rustle of costly silks, the haunting strain of violins playing softly far away, and the swift, recurrent ecstasy of strange and fantastic physical delights. Now, in reality, the honeymoon palace had shrunk to a tumble-down farm house without furniture and full of drafts, the only scent was that of mildew and must, and the love-talk was talk of budgets and grocery bills and down payments on machinery.

He took off his shoes, slid them behind the stove and put on worn leather slippers that were run over at the heels and made slapping noises when he walked. He heard Moira calling from the bedroom, "Hurry up, Neil. I'm cold."

He put a roll of paper across the bottom of the kitchen door where the wind came in and clumped off to the bedroom. Moira was standing in front of the unpainted dresser with the cracked mirror on top that Johnny had bought at the Williams' sale. She was wearing a black night-gown, very long and full—a wonderful filmy creation of lace and chiffon and ribbon, and she had done her hair in some new and fascinating way. Neil looked at her in wonder and growing delight.

"Moira!" he cried. "You look marvellous!"

"Oh, Neil—I bought it in Saskatoon and it cost twenty dollars—but it *is* our honeymoon—and maybe I won't be able to get another one for a long time and—oh, Neil—I'm darned near frozen!"

Then she was in his arms, and as he held her close he caught the delicate scent of some strange, perfume.

"Moira—" he began.

He broke off suddenly, relaxed his hold and stood with his head turned a little to one side.

"Neil—what is it?"

"Listen," he said. "Can't you hear?"

"I can hear the wind, if that's what you mean."

"Not the wind, Moira. Music. A long way off. Faint and mysterious. The way it should be."

Chapter Six

THE DAY was hot and the dust choking. The sun rode high in a heaven of clear pale blue, its rays beating down upon an earth that cried out for rain. Across the prairies the wind blew with inexorable persistence, a wind that scorched and seared every plant in its path and sucked the last microscopic traces of moisture from the soil, leaving parched and wilted fields of grain in its wake. Neil drove slowly along the highway in his rattling flivver, man and machine enveloped in a cloud of grey dust. Since his brakes did not work very well, he applied them when he was thirty yards or more from the cross-roads. Even so, he rolled a short distance past the point where he had meant to stop. Johnny Watson, who was waiting for him, came up grinning.

"Pretty soon you'll have to hop out and put a stone under the front wheel every time you want to stop. Or else throw out an anchor."

Neil did not return Johnny's smile. He lifted his hand from the wheel in salute, then sat back and rolled a cigarette. Johnny got in beside him, pulled out a bandanna handkerchief and wiped the dust from his face. "Stinker, ain't it?"

"Sure is." Neil stepped on the starter, for the engine had died. The only response was a feeble, whirring sound. "Battery's run down," he complained. "That's what kept me. I had to hitch a horse up to get started. Mind cranking?"

Johnny got out and cranked furiously. The engine started with a spluttering roar and he hopped back in beside Neil. "One thing," he said, "you don't have to worry none about sweatin' on a day like this. Water dries up before she even gets outside."

"Looks as if we'll be lucky to save seed," said Neil. "Everything's burning up. Unless we get rain soon—"

"We'll get it, all right," said Johnny. "Heat like this is bound to bring up a thunderstorm. Give us a soaker within a week and we'll get twenty bushel off summer-fallow and an average of mebbe ten all round. Course, if we don't—"

Neil looked up at the blue sky. "No sign of rain," he said. "Anyway, my crop's pretty well gone already."

"Tough goin', Neil," said Johnny diffidently. "You haven't had much luck since you come back—even in the good years. Mebbe I can pay you somethin' on what I owe you if it rains. But you know how it is with five kids and the wife needin' an operation."

"I know," said Neil shortly. He turned out to pass a hay-rack piled high with household goods and drawn by a team of lean bay horses. A man and woman were sitting on top of the load. Both were well past middle age. The man lifted his hand in response to Johnny's salute, but the woman sat staring straight ahead along the dusty road.

"Headin' for the Peace," said Johnny. "Yesterday I counted twelve outfits—old cars, trucks, two hayracks and a wagon-load. There was five kids on the wagon and they was leadin' a couple of cows so skinny you could see clear through them. All from the dust bowl. They figger they got nothin' to lose."

He was quiet for a moment, then went on with kindling enthusiasm. "They say it's a great country, Neil. Land's dirt cheap—even some good homesteads left. And lots of rain. Ain't been a crop failure since the country's been opened up."

"What about frost?"

"And that's a funny thing, Neil—there's less danger of frost way up there than down here, three hundred miles south. Reason is the days are longer up there in summer and you get more hours of sunshine. I was talkin' to a man in Riverview last week, a traveller, just come down from there. Said the crops were two weeks ahead of ours and good for thirty to the acre all through the block."

Neil felt a faint stirring of interest. "Sounds good," he said.

"I'll say it sounds good. Know what, Neil?"

"What?"

"I'm figgerin' on pullin' out myself and headin' up there. Right after harvest. Way I figger it, I can't be any worse off.

And there's a chance to make a killin' up there. The land around here's gettin' wore out. Too much wheat year after year, too many weeds. Up there a man has a chance to start over with land that's rich and clean and plumb full of minerals."

Neil did not say anything. Johnny, discouraged by his lack of enthusiasm, lapsed into a rare silence. They reached River-view. Neil drove down the main street cautiously, because of defective brakes, and on out to the exhibition grounds. Already the grounds were crowded with cars and buggies, and vehicles were still coming from all directions. "Seems like it's goin' to be quite a show," said Johnny. He was like a small boy—eager, impatient, excited.

Neil grinned sourly. "Yeah. Just like a medicine show in the old days. Noise, entertainment—and something for nothing. Only it won't work out that way in the end. Everybody's figuring on collecting twenty-five bucks a month. They haven't stopped to figure out who's going to pay the shot."

"Trouble is, Neil," said Johnny earnestly, "you just won't listen. You've been laughin' at Social Credit for a year now. But, far as I can figger out, you haven't tried to understand what it's all about. You haven't done any readin' about it. And I lent you lots of literature."

"Come clean now, Johnny. Have you got it all figured out nice and clear yourself?"

"Mebbe not—but then I ain't been to college. But this guy Aberhart has got somethin'. Any fool can see that. He's honest—he's a Christian. And that's more than you can say for any of the lousy politicians that have been ridin' on our necks ever since the West opened up."

Neil did not say anything more. It was too hot and, besides, he never liked arguing. He parked the car on the edge of the field and he and Johnny made their way to the centre of the fair grounds where the crowd was coalescing. A small platform with a canvas canopy over it had been set up on the baseball diamond, and rough wooden benches arranged on three sides. The benches were already packed and hundreds of people were standing behind them in a vast, restless semicircle. Neil and Johnny found a vantage point on a rising piece of ground just

beyond the old third-base line. They were a long way from the platform but they had a clear view of what was going on.

George Giles, a Riverview groceryman with political aspirations, was speaking. He was one of four candidates nominated in the constituency, one of whom would represent the newly formed Social Credit Party in the forthcoming provincial election. Giles was nervous, ill at ease. His speech was a mosaic of platitudes and carefully memorized quotations from party literature. He voiced his unqualified endorsement of the party programme, which assured twenty-five dollars a month to every man, woman and child in the Province, and sat down amid a perfunctory spattering of applause. He was succeeded by the other candidates, each of whom spoke for approximately five minutes and concluded with the assurance that if he were chosen to be party standard-bearer he would represent his constituency to the fullest extent of his ability—if not, he would get behind the successful nominee and work for him to the fullest extent of his ability.

The last speaker, a big red-faced farmer named Beak, wishing to vary the concluding formula, assured his delighted listeners that, if he himself were not nominated, he would get behind the successful candidate and give him everything he had. A roar of applause greeted the announcement, and Beak retired in confusion. Then the chairman, Les Conney from Hinesville, stepped forward. Silence settled over the waiting crowd. Conney, sensing the will of his listeners, wasted no time.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he bellowed, "the man we've come to hear! The leader of the Social Credit Party and the next Premier of Alberta—William Aberhart!"

A man, massively proportioned, got up from a chair near the back of the platform and, with a kind of stealthy, cat-like grace of movement which belied his vast bulk, moved forward to the front. A wave of cheering greeted him, cheering that had in it something more than mere excitement. The man on the platform waited quietly. His face was pale, smooth, expressionless, and yet in some curious way suggestive of almost hypnotic power. Neil understood now why newspapermen called him a sleepy Buddha.

Neil did not hear very much of what William Aberhart said.

He was too much preoccupied with the spectacle that he was witnessing—the spectacle of a people gripped by something approaching hysteria in the presence of the prophet of a new age. He had no power to look into the future; he could not see that the big man on the platform, enunciating a theory which sounded like wildest fantasy, would in fact be elected to office with one of the biggest majorities ever accorded a provincial party; he could not see that when the big man passed from the scene his power would be transmitted to the slight, frail youngster who at one time came forward almost timidly to participate with his leader in a dialogue intended to make clear the basic principles of Social Credit. But seeing what was happening before his eyes, what had already happened in other parts of the world became not merely credible but logical. Here was a people, impoverished, frustrated, dangerous. Here was a man who promised them material salvation in the form of twenty-five dollars a month. How many in the huge crowd really expected to receive twenty-five dollars a month if the Social Credit Party came into power Neil had no way of telling; he suspected not many. But in Bible Bill Aberhart, the man with the pale expressionless face and the sleepy eyes, they saw leadership—they saw the prospective annihilation of whatever had been responsible for their frustration, and they were prepared to follow him with a kind of desperate trust in the wisdom and the strength of the prophet because they no longer trusted their own. They were a people baffled, beaten but not passive, unwilling to accept what had happened to them as either the will of God or the consequence of their own follies. And in that refusal, thought Neil, lay the secret of their capacity to endure and to fight.

Johnny Watson was even more than usually voluble on the way home. "Neil, you got to admit it," he urged, "there's a real man—the first real man we've ever had in politics! Mebbe his idea about twenty-five dollars a month is screwy. But what of it? You *know* the guy's sincere. You *know* he's in there pitchin' for the people. If we put him in we put in a man, not a political machine. He's my man! I'll vote for him a dozen times if I get the chance!"

Neil did not say anything. He sat at the wheel looking

straight ahead. Away from the crowd he felt an almost overwhelming resurgence of the sense of weariness and discouragement that nowadays seldom left him. Maybe Johnny was right; maybe the thing to do was to clear out. His own land was still weed-infested; nearly a hundred acres was shot through and through with a dense growth of couch-grass which was spreading with inexorable and terrifying persistence. "Tell me, Johnny," he said. "You still interested in the Peace country now that you're going to get twenty-five dollars a month just for sitting on your fanny?"

"Bet your life I am!" said Johnny. "Way I look at it, that twenty-five a month will just about keep us in grub while we're gettin' our teeth in up there, leavin' what I get from the sale to buy machinery with. Mebbe I won't even wait till fall," he went on with rising enthusiasm. "Mebbe I'll go up myself next week—figger I could hitch-hike from Edmonton and look over the lay of the land. Trouble is, the missus isn't so well. And there's the chores to do—"

"If you decide to go, I can slip over and look after the chores for you. I've just got one cow to milk," said Neil.

He stopped at the cross-roads and Johnny got out. "That's real good of you, Neil," he said. He stood with one foot on the running-board and rolled a cigarette. "I don't suppose you figger there's any use the Wildcats enterin' the Hinesville tournament next Wednesday? Not much dough, only fifty bucks altogether. But still—"

"Whatever you like, Johnny. It's your team."

Neil spoke without enthusiasm. The Wildcats had reorganized late in the season, but so far they had won no tournaments. And Neil had come to hate the tournament atmosphere that he had once felt to be the very breath of life. For now the game was a desperately earnest business, played not for renown, as in the old days, but for the few dollars at stake. To men like Johnny—to Neil himself—the two or three dollars which might be the meagre share of each of the winners was something to fight for. And for that kind of struggle Neil had no heart. Besides, the Wildcats were old and tired. Johnny Watson was nearly forty now, and pathetically slow at first base. Neil himself loathed the physical exertion which pitching now entailed.

His arm ached agonizingly after every game. His speed was gone, and he had to rely almost entirely on control. But the competition was far too keen; too many baseball bums haunted the tournaments—youngsters who had nothing to do but wander from tournament to tournament, playing with any team that would offer them a share of the winnings, afterwards swilling away their dollar or two of prize money in some sour-smelling beer-parlour. They were hard, reckless, above all, young. They were too tough for an old man's outfit like the Wildcats.

"Way I look at it, Johnny," Neil added, "you and I are through. But if you want to keep on trying, why it's all right with me."

"Guess you're right, Neil," said Johnny wistfully. "A man sort of hates to feel he can't keep up with the kids any more. But that's the way it is. Mebbe we'd better call it a day."

Neil drove on home. On the way he passed a horseman riding east. The horseman shouted to him, but Neil kept his eyes on the road. When he reached the house he found Moira in the garden at the back watering some of the plants.

"Neil," she said, and her voice sounded tired, "I honestly think this well water does more harm than good—there's so much alkali in it. I wish you'd make a dug-out, then we'd be able to haul a few barrels of soft water when the drought comes on."

Neil nodded absently. "I'll see about it before harvest," he said. "Was George Meeker here?"

"Yes. He dropped in for a few minutes. He wanted to see you about borrowing a horse."

"He must have known I'd be at the meeting," Neil said. He put the car in the tumble-down garage and returned to the house. Moira left the water-can on the kitchen steps and they went inside together. There was a fire burning in the stove and the kitchen was stiflingly hot.

"I gave George a cup of tea," Moira explained apologetically. "He looked sort of pathetic."

Neil grunted. "A typical Englishman. The whole world could be falling apart but George would still have his cup of tea. Even when it's ninety above."

"Don't be too hard on him, Neil," Moira said. "He's lonely—and awfully young."

Neil glanced at her sharply. "He's full grown."

"What do you mean?" Moira's voice was quiet, dangerously so.

"Only that he should be able to look after himself. He doesn't need mothering."

Moira did not say anything. She pulled a pan forward and began slicing potatoes into it. Neil picked up the weekly paper that he had brought home from the post office and went into the living-room where it was comparatively cool. The blinds were drawn and the front door tightly closed.

Neil liked the living-room. It was always clean, but not so clean that he felt unable to relax and put his feet upon the battered chesterfield if he wanted to. The furniture was sparse but comfortable and Moira had done wonders with a few scraps of curtain material and an occasional hooked rug. But this evening Neil felt only irritation as he sat back in the arm-chair which right of possession had established as his, and looked about him. The room was shabby, pathetically so. The wood-work needed re-doing, the floor-boards which Moira had painted a bright green where the linoleum had worn off were splintered and rotten, and there were great cracks in the wall plaster which successive layers of calsomine were unable to conceal. And everywhere the dust lay in a thick grey film—dust that filtered in under the windows in spite of the wet cloths that Moira had laid along the sills, under the door, seemingly out of the very walls themselves. And it would always be like this—always the unrelenting struggle against an environment that was either too hot or too cold, or dusty or muddy, but never equable, never kindly. Johnny Watson was right; it was time to be on the move. Neil sat there, leafing through the pages of the farm journal, but with unseeing eyes. His imagination had leapt over three hundred miles of prairie and parkland to the cool banks of the smooth-flowing Peace, so unlike the turbulent, yellow Saskatchewan, where his acres stretched through miles of woodland and pasture and wheat field, and where his green and white colonial house, standing on a rising point of ground, commanded a magnificent sweep of water stretching into remote,

purple distances. Yes, Johnny was right. The promised land lay north. And Neil was going!

Moira called him to supper. The kitchen was still like an oven. "I'm sorry it's so hot, Neil," Moira said. "But I think it's better to eat out here than in the living-room. This way we can at least keep the living-room cool and the flies out."

She sat down and began dishing vegetables onto Neil's plate. Her face was damp with sweat and strands of hair clung to her forehead. She looked tired and white, and there were great dark circles under her eyes.

"Never mind," Neil said. "We can stand it. And I'll help you with the dishes."

Moira smiled at him. But she said nothing. Neil helped himself to a mouthful of omelette and fried potatoes. "Moira," he said, "I think it's time we were on the move."

"What do you mean, Neil?"

"Just what I say, dear. We're going north—to the Peace."

Moira did not say anything for a minute. When she spoke her voice was flat. "I suppose Johnny Watson's been talking to you."

Neil was nettled. "He did say something this afternoon—but I've been thinking about it myself for a long time. The way I look at it, Moira, is like this. The land here is worn out, sour. Even if we do get lots of rain again, the crops will never amount to much. And I'm so sick of it all—sick of seeing you drudge from day to day with nothing to work with—nothing to look forward to—no money to buy even a jar of cold cream or a pair of decent stockings! You weren't meant for this kind of life, darling—you hate it as much as I do—and I'm going to take you away from it. If we go north, start all over again with good land, in a year or two—five at the most—we'll be on easy street!"

Moira did not say anything. Neil laid down his knife and fork and leaned eagerly towards her. "Listen, Moira, we'll have a sale in the fall, right after threshing, and clear out. On our way to the Peace we'll stop in Edmonton—stay at the Macdonald—have a real blowout for once in our lives—shows every night—new clothes for you—hairdos—all the trimmings! We'll have a holiday—a honeymoon—four years late but all the better!"

Impulsively he jumped up and kissed her. "Neil," she said, "it all sounds so wonderful."

"I'll say it does. And it *is* wonderful! Next week I'll find out about homesteads, or maybe I'd better go up with Johnny. I said I'd do his chores while he was away, but maybe we could get George Meeker to go over."

"Maybe," said Moira. "But there's plenty of time to make arrangements."

She did not ask any questions. Neil talked on. He had not been so cheerful in months. After supper he drove over to see Johnny Watson. It was nearly midnight when he got back. Moira was in bed but she was not asleep. He undressed quickly and got in beside her.

"Johnny figures he'll be able to get away next week, all right, if Meeker will look after the chores once a day. We'll stay about ten days or two weeks in the Peace—be gone nearly a month altogether. And we'll hitch-hike all the way. Won't cost us anything except our grub." He laughed joyously, like an excited schoolboy, and drew Moira close to him. "Will you miss me a lot?"

Her body did not respond to his touch. "Neil, I'd like to talk to you."

There was something in her voice that chilled him. He was silent, waiting for her to speak.

"I guess we should have talked it over before you went to see Johnny. But for a while I got sort of worked up—and, afterwards, I just hadn't the heart—"

"So you don't want to go."

"Neil, it's not that. I'd love to go. But we can't."

"Why not?"

"Because, Neil, we just haven't got the money. If you got a homestead we'd be nearly a hundred miles from a railroad, off in the bush country. It might be romantic for a few weeks, but we'd starve to death eventually. You know that as well as I do. And cultivated land is a far higher price than it is here. Oh, I know it's a grand place to dream about. But, Neil, we've got to face facts."

"I didn't know you were such an authority on the Peace River country."

"Neil, please don't be like that. George Meeker has just come down from there. He says that people are moving up in the hundreds from the dried-out areas but can't find any place to go. They'll nearly all be back in a month or two."

"Maybe if George were going back you'd be more interested," he said.

Moira lay very quiet. But her body was rigid. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I was just joking."

Moira went on as if there had been no interruption. But the edge was in her voice. "And besides, Neil, if you're honest you'll admit that most of what's happened to us here is our own fault. We've been here four years, and we haven't got rid of a single weed. Our farm is the dirtiest in the country and it's getting worse all the time. It's not that the land is sour, Neil, and you know it. It's just that it's neglected, only half-cultivated. It's our own fault that we're in a mess, not nature's."

"Nice of you to use the plural," he said. "All right, it's my fault. I'm a rotten farmer. So what? Whose idea was it that we come back to the farm?" He tried to talk quietly, deliberately, but he could not keep his voice from rising.

"It was a choice, for you, of coming back to the farm or going on the bread-line. If you were honest with yourself you'd admit it."

Neil got out of bed, went into the living-room and lay down on the couch. He used one of the cushions as a pillow and since the night was warm he needed no covering. He lay very quietly on his back, listening for sounds from the bedroom. He was angry—so angry that for a time he could hardly think coherently. Maybe he was a poor farmer, but she had known what he was like before she had married him. It was a poor thing, a mean thing, to throw a man's faults in his face that way without warning. Particularly when she did so just to find an excuse for spoiling his plans for the future.

But Neil never remained angry for long. Presently he admitted to himself that there was at least a grain of common sense in a good deal that Moira had said. He could not surrender his dream of adventuring in a new land, but after half an hour of tossing and turning on the chesterfield, he decided that it

would be wise to postpone a trip north until after harvest. In the meantime Johnny Watson would be back with his report.

There were still no sounds from the bedroom. Neil got up, eased his limbs and tiptoed back to bed. Moira was lying very still, facing the wall. "Sorry, dear," he said. "Guess you were right. I should have thought a little more. Got carried away by my own eloquence, I guess. I'll wait till fall, anyway. Then Johnny will be able to tell us how things are up there."

Moira's body did not relax. When she spoke her voice was muffled and Neil knew that she had been crying. "There's another thing, Neil. I'd have told you sooner but I wasn't quite sure—"

His heart missed a beat. "Moira, what's the matter?"

"There's nothing the matter, Neil. Only I'm going to have a baby."

She turned to him then and he put his arms around her and she lay close against him. "I'm sorry, Neil. I know that you'll feel tied now. But there's nothing we can do about it."

"Moira, I think it's grand!" There was genuine enthusiasm in his voice. "Hope it's a boy. Someone to milk the cow."

He laughed then, and Moira laughed, too; then for a time they forgot everything in the transient ecstasy of the moment.

But afterwards, when Moira was asleep, Neil lay on his side staring out of the window into the glittering moonlit night. There was no escape now and he knew it. He was chained to the farm, come good or evil. And in his heart there was neither peace nor resignation—only bitterness, and a slowly gathering resentment against the woman who indirectly had helped to fashion his chains.

Chapter Seven

THE CHILD WAS BORN in January, at noon on a bitter winter's day. Neil had driven Moira the previous evening over drifted roads to the Red Hill Hospital. He spent an uncomfortable night at the hotel, saw Moira briefly the next morning, when labour pains had set in in earnest, and returned in a state of great agitation to the hotel to await word from the hospital. When he went back in the afternoon Moira was still groggy. She greeted him with a wan smile, mumbled a few incoherent words and fell asleep. Later he was allowed a glimpse of his son. He was shocked immeasurably by the red, wizened toothless object that lay in the nurse's arms, making strange mewling noises. He escaped as soon as he could. He saw Moira again in the evening, then drove home over roads that were by now almost impassable. He got stuck half a mile from the house and had to leave the car in a drift. The house was unbelievably cold and bleak, and he was lonely. The thought of his son gave him no pleasure; and he looked at the cheap varnished crib standing in one corner of the bedroom with apprehension and something like disgust. He felt that the monkey-like creature he had seen in the nurse's arms would be capable of committing almost any outrage against the peace and dignity of a household. Certainly, what he had read in books about babies and parenthood did not prepare him for the reality. In fiction, the father experienced a powerful welling-up of paternal affection at first glimpse of his offspring. Neil's only reaction had been one of revulsion. There was, too, the added factor of instinctive resentment against the child, who had become the visible symbol of enslavement. Altogether, Neil did not enjoy the first days of fatherhood.

Nor did a more intimate acquaintance with his son do anything to counteract the early impressions. The baby, whom they

christened Ian David after Moira's father, was, in fact, difficult during the early months of his life. He cried almost incessantly at night, allowing neither of his parents much rest, lost many of his meals immediately upon consumption, and did not seem to develop any of the engaging baby tricks popularly supposed to be characteristic of most children of his age.

A further cause of irritation lay in the demands that the child made upon Neil's meagre income. The cost of items like crib sheets and diapers, and, a little later, rompers and overalls and sweaters, seemed enormous in proportion to the satisfaction or benefit that anyone derived from them; and several times he was moved to angry protest. "Listen, Moira," he said one day, when he found her making out a seemingly endless order from the mail-order catalogue, "that money I gave you was to go for some clothes for yourself. You're blowing it all on truck for the kid. Surely he's got enough!"

Moira laid down her pen. "I know how you feel, Neil. I know you want me to look smart and pretty, and I do my best. But honestly, Ian has to have these things... He's got only one complete outfit now, and his clothes have to be changed so often. Of course, I suppose I could wash his things every night after he goes to bed, but I'm so tired by then that I just don't feel as if I could stand any more."

Neil felt a swift surge of pity and regret. Characteristically, he expressed his feelings in an outburst of senseless anger. "It's a rotten shame, that's what it is!" he stormed. "You weren't meant for this sort of thing; Moira—scrubbing and working day in and day out—with never a rest, never a holiday, no new clothes for nearly two years. There's still a jag of wheat in the granary. I'll sell it right away and you can blow the proceeds."

"We'll see." She smiled at him and picked up her pen. Neil knew that he was being dismissed. He went outside and busied himself with chores until supper-time. When he came in, Ian, who had slipped and fallen off the bottom step of the stairs, was crying lustily. The table was set, but Moira was in the bedroom. Neil picked Ian up and tried to comfort him. When Moira appeared he said testily, "The poor kid got a bad bump. You might have picked him up."

"I knew he wasn't hurt," said Moira. "You can tell the way he cries. And he gets too much attention as it is."

She had changed into a clean print dress and put on make-up. Neil looked at her with pleasure. It was a long time since she had seemed so attractive. Then he remembered that George Meeker was coming over that evening, and his pleasure gave way to annoyance. "Nice to see you looking more like yourself again," he said. "George will be pleased."

Moira did not say anything. She went to the kitchen and began getting the supper. Neil remained in the living-room with Ian. He held the child by the wrists and put him through the manoeuvre of skinning the cat. But he paid little attention to Ian's shrill squeals of delight. He was genuinely hurt. Moira, it seemed, never dressed up for him any more. But when George Meeker came around it was different. And deep down within him, there was something more than irritation. He remembered things that he had long ago determined to shut out, and was suddenly afraid.

Moira appeared to have forgotten what he had said. She was gay at supper, unusually so, and although Neil replied in kind to her banter, he looked at her suspiciously. After supper he washed the dishes while Moira got Ian ready for bed. Then they all took part in an exciting game of catch, Ian standing up in his crib and squealing ecstatically as they tossed his rag doll back and forth.

"He really is sweet, isn't he?" Moira said, tucking the covers in around him.

"Not bad, not bad," said Neil. For a fleeting moment life seemed good.

But afterwards, when George Meeker arrived and Neil saw the light in Moira's eyes, his resentment flared up again. Meeker was a big man with blond hair and a thin, haunted face. A remittance man, he lived on a quarter-section of land adjoining Johnny Watson's place, farming haphazardly, raising a little wheat and a few head of cattle. He spent a good deal of time riding about the country on a magnificent pinto saddle-horse in picturesque cowboy costume; he had even carried a gun until stopped by the police. Recently he had bought a fine roadster which he drove at terrifying speed. He was strikingly

handsome, soft-voiced, well-educated, with an air of wistful innocence that belied his real nature. "When I sees that Meeker comin' I locks my womenfolk up—even Grandma," old Joe Simpson was reported to have said, thereby expressing the prevailing sentiment of the more sober members of the community.

Meeker had been coming to see Neil and Moira for nearly three years now, casual visits once or twice a week during which they all sat in the living-room and talked or listened to the radio, or occasionally, in winter-time, played a few rounds of three-handed cribbage. But lately, so it seemed to Neil, Meeker had been coming oftener, sometimes on afternoons when Neil was away. He liked Meeker, who knew a lot about books and music, and who in his shadowed past had met men like Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon. But his liking was mingled with distrust; and he saw in George Meeker something of the facile charm that had once delighted him in Charlie Steele. Nor could he shut his eyes to the fact that Moira and Helen Martell had much in common. But history was not going to repeat itself. Of that he was determined.

Tonight he was watchful, suspicious. But Meeker talked about the time when as a small boy he had been taken to tea at Joseph Conrad's house and had upset a plate of bread and butter on the floor. He described the trivial incident well, and in spite of himself Neil relaxed. Moira enjoyed herself whole-heartedly. She laughed a great deal and looked younger than she had done since Ian came. And Neil was proud of her, as he had once been long ago. Proud and afraid.

Over his coffee Meeker suddenly became prosaic. "I've had a brain-wave, Neil," he said rather diffidently. "Looks as if there won't be much crop this year. Shortage of feed and all that."

Neil nodded. "Things don't look so good," he admitted.

"I heard in Riverview yesterday that farmers are willing to pay ten dollars a head to have their stock wintered. There's a lot of good hay on my place, and I can rent the half north of me, along the river. Plenty of hay there. I thought I might put up a few hundred ton—winter maybe two hundred head of cattle.

But I want help from someone who knows the ropes. Thought you might be interested. Go half shares, of course."

"Oh, Neil!" cried Moira. "It sounds grand. And you do know a lot about cattle."

Neil grunted noncommittally. "It's mighty decent of you, George," he said. "We'll talk it over again. There are some things I'd have to figure out."

"Quite right," said Meeker. "Sleep on it. But I'd like to know soon. Have to start haying next week—and I'll need help."

He left soon afterwards. As soon as he was out of the house Moira turned on Neil. There were two angry red spots in her cheeks and her eyes were flashing. "Neil, why didn't you take George up on that offer?"

Neil picked up his pipe—he had given up cigarettes because they were too expensive—and filled it from the round tin that stood on the table. "It's not the sort of thing I'd want to rush into," he said. "There are a lot of angles to consider. George, after all, isn't very reliable. We might lose a lot of cattle, wind up in the hole, in fact. And besides, there aren't many farmers who can afford to pay ten dollars a head to have their stock wintered. The whole thing sounds like a pipe-dream that George had in the beer-parlour."

"Don't judge all farmers by yourself," she flared. "Most of the farmers around here have had crops occasionally during the past five years. We haven't—and you know why. And you know, too, that there's all kinds of hay on George's place and north of there just waiting to be cut. If you had any gumption you could make a thousand dollars this winter. But, of course, it would mean a lot of hard work. Why don't you be honest and admit that that's the real reason why you won't go in on the job?"

Neil lit his pipe with shaking hand. Moira sat down at the table opposite him. "I hate to have to talk to you like this, Neil, but we've got to do *something*. Year after year it's the same story—ten bushel to the acre when everyone else gets twenty—no pigs, no cattle because they mean chores—and you hate chores. Before Ian came it wasn't so bad—but now we've got to think of him. It isn't fair, Neil."

He sat silent and stony-faced. Moira waited a moment and then went on. "I hate to hurt you, Neil, but we can't go on this way. I know that in the winter you like to be free to write—to spend a lot of time in your study—and what you write is good." There was no real enthusiasm in her voice. "But we've got to eat, Neil, and the house is simply falling to pieces. And now, at last, you have a chance to make some real money—a thousand dollars maybe—during the winter. Why not forget about your writing for a year until we get on our feet? If you do, you'll be able to write much better later; because you won't have worries gnawing at you—"

She was no longer angry. She was pleading with him now, pleading desperately. He got up and smiled at her without warmth.

"I know I can't write, Moira," he said. "No need to rub it in."

He went upstairs slowly to the attic room, which he liked to call his study. More and more, since Ian arrived, had he come to regard it as a sanctuary from the distraction that always reigned elsewhere in the house. The door had a bolt on the inside; and Ian had learned that to stand outside and cry lustily availed him nothing. The old desk stood at one end, a comfortable arm-chair in front of it. There were only a few books in the shelves—not nearly so many as in the living-room—but they were Neil's favourites, mostly the standard poets with a few moderns like Sandburg and Robinson and Frost. The walls were hung with badly framed sketches of famous writers, most of them cut out of the book review sections of popular periodicals. There was a great stack of yellowing paper on the desk and an old-fashioned ink-well and one or two steel-nibbed pens beside it. Neil used his typewriter only for final drafts.

He lit the oil lamp that hung on a wall bracket above the desk, sat down and leaned back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head. He was in a mood of bitter self-pity. He had struggled for years against a combination of circumstances strong enough to vanquish the doughtiest fighter—a poor farm, a succession of dry years, low prices. He was not a successful farmer, granted, but he had done his best at a job which he

hated. It was hard that he should be rewarded only with slights and insults.

But gradually his mood changed. From Moira's point of view things naturally looked a lot different. It wasn't really fair to her, spending so much time in his study, especially in winter, leaving her to wrestle with the main domestic problems that cropped up. For a fleeting moment the words of Andrea Del Sarto passed through his mind, "Had the mouth there urged, 'God and the glory, never care for gain' . . . I might have done it for you"—and he reflected wistfully on what might have been, had Moira been one who placed Art above Bread.

But he dismissed the reflection. He wasn't much of a writer and never would be. He knew that now. He didn't have a way with words and his sentences were clumsy. But rarely, very rarely, he said something in exactly the way he wanted to, and then he went round in a mood of strange exhilaration. At first he was puzzled because on such occasions he felt no need to communicate what he had said to anyone, not even Moira. But then he had read the words of Keats, "When I feel I am right, no external praise can give me such a glow as my own solitary reperception and ratification of what is fine"—and straightway he had thought, maybe I am a poet, after all. And for a short time he had felt a strange thrill of kinship every time he opened his Keats.

He sat in the chair for a long time. Then he got up and went downstairs. Moira was in the kitchen, sewing by the light of the big gasoline lamp that hung from the ceiling. There were streaks of grey now in her hair; tonight, in the harsh glare of the overhead light, they seemed more noticeable than ever before. She looked up when he came into the kitchen and smiled at him. "Long past bedtime," she said. "But I have to get these overalls ready for the morning."

He sat down and tried hard to appear at his ease. "Moira, I've been thinking things over. You're right, of course. You always are. In the morning I'll go over first thing and see George. We'll close the deal right away. Then if the weather holds we can get to work on the hay the day after tomorrow. There'll be a lot to do before harvest."

Moira laid down her sewing. "Are you quite sure, Neil,

that you want to?" Her voice was even, but the lights were dancing in her eyes.

"You mean will I go through with it?" He laughed, half-ashamed. "Moira, I promise you. I'll make the deal with George in the morning and I'll go through with it. I know what you're thinking right now—but you're wrong, quite wrong. Because, you see, Moira, I haven't really got any illusions about myself. I'm a rotten writer—and I know it. I've been writing odds and ends for years now, and all I've ever done is collect enough rejection slips to paper the spare room. I've started three novels—they've all petered out in the first ten thousand words. I just haven't got what it takes. Tonight I've looked at things straight. And to show you that I mean what I say, I'm going to burn every line of doggerel and rubbish that I've ever written. Will that convince you?"

"Neil, you don't mean it?"

"But I do mean it!" he cried, jumping to his feet. Suddenly the burning of his manuscripts had taken on enormous significance. It would be a supreme act of renunciation, a *beau geste* of heroic proportions.

Moira threw her arms about his neck. "Oh, Neil," she whispered, "I believe that you *do* mean it! And I'm glad—glad!"

She felt his body stiffen and hastened to explain. "Because I know now that you *are* brave, Neil—brave enough to face losing something that means a great deal to you."

"Only an illusion," he smiled.

"But an illusion can mean so much more than something real," she said.

He returned her kiss and went back upstairs. When he came down his arms were piled with manuscripts accumulated over many years—some of them old, faded, yellowing at the corners, others that had been written within the past year. Moira took the lid off the stove and Neil thrust in a single page. It was a sonnet that he had written long ago, before going to college. The concluding couplet was missing. Another unfinished task. The fire in the stove had gone out, so Neil struck a match and set fire to the sheet of paper. Then he fed the rest of the sheets one by one to the flames. Moira stood silently at his elbow.

The burning of the manuscripts took a long time. But at last Neil bent down, picked a scrap of paper off the floor and threw it into the fire. "There," he said, a note of triumphant finality in his voice, "that's all. The old Neil is dead, dear. How do you like the new one?" He smiled at her whimsically and slid his arm about her shoulders.

But Moira did not respond. "Neil," she said, a note of incredulous wonder in her voice. "I really believe you mean it!"

"Of course I mean it!" He laughed, almost joyously. "Aren't you glad?"

There was a look in her eyes that he had never seen there before. "Neil, I—I—" she began. But the words seemed to choke in her throat and suddenly she turned away and buried her face in her hands.

Neil made no move to comfort her. He stood very straight and still, his arms held stiffly by his sides, and watched a charred fragment of paper flutter across the top of the stove and out of sight.

Chapter Eight

INEVITABLY Neil's feelings towards his son underwent a change, although for a long time he found the nature of the change hard to define. The feeling of resentment had been deep-rooted, resentment stemming from the fact that the child represented a liability which bound Neil inexorably to a way of life which he hated. He resented, too, the numerous intrusions upon his privacy. After he gave up his study he did most of his reading in the living-room, but except in the evenings, after Ian had gone to bed, there was no peace indoors. It had been pleasant in the old days to spend a blustery winter's afternoon sitting in the big arm-chair behind the heater, smoking and dreaming. But with a lively child loose in the house, such afternoons were no longer possible.

Ian developed rapidly. By the time he was four years old he was a fine, sturdy youngster, very tall for his age, with a thick crop of nearly white hair, blue eyes, and round cheeks that glowed with health and exertion. He demanded a good deal of attention and usually got it, even from Neil, who found it less trouble to give in to his pleas than to resist them. Neil continued from time to time to speak bitterly about the child's inability to entertain himself, but he gradually ceased making Ian the object of his irritated outbursts. Ian was essentially a good-natured little animal, with just enough cunning to know how to get round both his parents, and he capitalized to the limit on his instinct.

Neil could not have said when he first began to feel an affection for his son that was in some ways stronger than any emotion he had hitherto known. He stubbornly insisted, much to Moira's annoyance, that a child was no more interesting than a puppy; but he did not attempt to explain the strange, glad lift of heart he now felt when he saw a stout little figure in blue overalls

scuttling towards him and heard the joyous scream, "Hi, Daddy. Bring me anything from the store?"

"Just listen to the little grafter," he would grumble to Moira, as he tossed the boy high in the air. "Loves his old man so long as he thinks he can get something out of him. I just represent a source of supply."

All the same, he was pleased. For a time, too, he enjoyed telling Ian bedtime stories, some of them made up on the spur of the moment about little boys who ran away from home and had wonderful adventures with trucks and trains and airplanes. He was secretly much gratified to find that Ian was more interested in these original creations than in such classic children's fare as Goldilocks and the Three Bears and Little Red Riding Hood. Occasionally he thought of sending some of the stories to a publisher, but the inclination was always short-lived, and after a time the story hour became a burden. Ian demanded the same stories over and over again until Neil was heartily sick of even his own creations. It would be a great day, he thought, when Ian would be able to read for himself. But even as he reflected on the freedom that he would then enjoy, a lump came into his throat. For the little tow-headed shaver sitting happily on his knee would be gone then. And there would be no way of ever bringing him back.

Neil drove home from the field on his tractor one fine spring day and was surprised that Ian did not come hurrying to meet him. A ride on the tractor from the top of the ridge by the poplar bluff down to the gate had become one of the rituals of childhood which establish themselves almost imperceptibly, but with a deep-rooted strength that is a source of constant amazement and frequent annoyance to the adults who are required to participate. Neil drove down to the gate, stopped the tractor and went into the house. "Where's the kid?" he said to Moira.

"I don't know. Didn't he meet you?"

Neil went to the door and called. There was no answering shriek. He turned again to Moira and there was a sudden empty feeling in his stomach. "When did you see him last?"

"I don't remember. Half an hour ago, maybe. He was playing around the yard."

They went outside together. "I'll look around the barn," Neil said shortly. "He's probably there."

Ian was not in the barn. Neil thought of the old well near the poplar bluff; a week ago he had noticed that the cover had been pushed partly aside, and he had made a mental note to replace the cover and nail it down. But he had not done so. He tried to walk to the well without haste; but when he reached it his legs were shaking under him and the sweat was streaming down his face. The cover was still partly in place, but there was an opening wide enough to admit a small body. Neil dropped to his knees and looked down into the black hole. A smell of damp, rotten wood struck his nostrils. Then he heard Moira's voice calling, "He's here, Neil," and the relief was so overwhelming that for a moment he was unable to get to his feet. His lips moved in a mumbled prayer. "Thank God, oh, thank God!"

When he reached the house Moira and Ian were waiting for him on the kitchen steps. "He was sound asleep in the weeds beside the garden," Moira explained. "He'd been hoeing weeds, I guess, and just tired himself out." Moira was pale, but her voice was light. Ian looked peevishly at his father.

"You didn't gimme a ride on the tractor," he said.

Neil stalked past them into the kitchen. "Might be a good idea if you kept an eye on the kid," he said. "He'll get into trouble some day."

He was shaken, more than he had imagined possible; and the horrifying picture of a small body plummeting down into the black depths of the well was one that he could not get out of his head. After dinner he went out immediately, found some planking and four-inch spikes and nailed the lid down securely. For the rest of the day he was unusually tender towards Ian, who made use of the opportunity provided to bargain for three stories at bedtime.

And yet a few days later a trivial act on Ian's part roused Neil to a pitch of blind, unreasoning fury. Neil had bought a few head of cattle with part of the proceeds from his partnership with George Meeker the previous winter, and pastured them on the home quarter, since the well at the barn was his only reliable water supply. Ian, in the course of his afternoon's activities,

had left open the small swing gate in the fence around the barn, and the cattle, twelve head all told, had found their way out through the gate and onto the one field of wheat that promised a fair yield. When Neil came home from supper he was in a bad temper. The weather was hot and dry, the tractor had given him a good deal of trouble all afternoon, and he hated tinkering with machinery. When, from the top of the ridge, he saw the cattle in the wheat field, he ignored Ian, who had come to meet him, and drove on down to the barn. It took him half an hour's hard work to get the cattle back into the pasture, and by the time he had finished he was exhausted and furious. Ian remained in the yard standing by the tractor. When Neil stalked over to him he started to cry. "Daddy, you didn't give me a ride."

Neil caught the child by the collar of his cotton jersey. Ian squirmed, tried to get away. Suddenly, inexplicably, Neil saw red. He jerked Ian off his feet, swung him across his knee and struck him hard with his open palm. Again and again he struck, while Ian's voice rose in an hysterical shriek, not so much of pain as of terror, and his body writhed convulsively. Then there was a flash of colour through the gate and Moira was crying in his ear, "Neil—Neil—let him go!"

Neil did not let go. Then Moira struck at him, struck so hard that he felt a trickle of blood run down the corner of his mouth. He pushed Ian away and Moira caught the child up in her arms and held him close. Neil stood in front of her, awkward and ashamed. "You coward!" she said. "You rotten coward!" And she turned and ran with Ian into the house.

When Neil went in for supper he and Moira carefully avoided speaking to each other. Only Ian seemed ready to forget and forgive. After supper he climbed on his father's knee, story-book in hand. "You spanked me pretty hard, didn't you, Daddy?" he said.

"Pretty hard," said Neil. "You shouldn't have left the gate open."

"I won't any more," Ian promised, and the incident was closed. But there was an odd, speculative look in Moira's eyes now, and for several days Neil stayed outside as much as possible. He could not justify his conduct toward Ian even to himself.

but he felt that Moira was being unfair. It was the first time he had ever struck the child in anger, and the provocation had been great. But Moira was not prepared to forgive easily. She spoke to him with a studied friendliness that was not intended to deceive. And for the first time since they were married she found an excuse for sleeping alone.

"It's so hot, Neil," she said. "I think I'll sleep on the chesterfield for a while."

"If you like," he said with assumed indifference, and went on reading.

Harvest was early that year. One Saturday night, shortly after Neil had begun cutting, George Meeker drove over with some spare parts that he had picked up in town for Neil's binder. He arrived about five o'clock and stayed for supper. Neil and Moira usually ate their meals in almost complete silence now, except for Ian's chatter, but with Meeker for company, Moira was animated and gay. Neil observed with the same old feeling of resentment that she had found time to put on a fresh dress and lipstick. She looked attractive—startlingly so—but he could take no pleasure in her appearance. After all, he was not meant to.

After supper Meeker helped Moira with the dishes while Neil told Ian his stories. He could hear a good deal of laughter coming from the kitchen, followed once or twice by uncalled-for silences that aroused his suspicions. Once, during a silence, he put Ian down, went quietly to the kitchen door and opened it. Meeker was sitting in a chair cleaning his pipe. Moira was in the pantry putting dishes on a high shelf. Neil stammered something about a drink for Ian and tried hard to look self-possessed. Meeker grinned at him. "Neil, between harvesting and looking after the youngster, you need a change. What about a show tonight?"

Neil poured some water into a glass. "Fat chance," he said. "Don't forget, George, that there's the kid to look after."

Moira came out of the pantry. "I thought we could leave Ian with the Watsons. He likes Julie Watson and he'd sleep there, all right. I'll give her a ring if you like."

"I think Julie Watson has her hands full already," said Neil shortly.

Moira flushed but said nothing. Meeker stood up. "Then perhaps Moira and I might go. Moira looks pretty tired."

"Good idea," said Neil. He went into the living-room and gave Ian the drink of water. "You'd better hurry," he called out. "Second show starts at nine."

He smiled at Moira as she went past him into the bedroom. Then, when she and George were in the car, he went out to the gate leading to the trail past the barn and opened it for them. Moira waved to him as they went through and George honked the horn. Still smiling, Neil waved back. He returned to the house, put Ian into his cot, and sat down in the living-room.

He listened to the evening news broadcast and for a time forgot his domestic worries. Hitler had issued an ultimatum to Poland; war, said an unnamed spokesman, was imminent. Neil dialled one or two American stations, but after a while turned off the radio and sat in the growing dusk, pondering many things. They had been talking of war for a long time now. But there would be no war. Hitler would back down. In spite of all that was said of him, he was not really a gambler. He took few chances. And he would not take this, the biggest chance of all. Everyone knew that war nowadays would be so inconceivably destructive as to wipe out or cripple all the embattled nations. War made no sense, even if you won.

He sat in his shabby arm-chair for a long time. It pleased him that he had conducted himself in a civilized manner this evening. He had even encouraged his wife to go out with a man who, although not yet her lover, might soon very well be. For Moira and George Meeker were attracted to each other and had been for a long time. It was not surprising. Meeker was handsome, well-bred. He had an air. "Whereas I," Neil said to himself, "am common clay." And he felt pleasantly melancholy.

And supposing he lost Moira, it would only be a part of the common fabric of his life—a life in which he had never done anything he wanted to, or achieved anything on which he had set his heart. And the future, he knew, held no promise. The crop this year was poor, as usual, and the price of wheat continued low. There would be enough money to pay arrears in taxes, buy one or two essential pieces of machinery, and that would

be about all. No money for a holiday, for a new car, even for a few new clothes. And things would never be any better. He could not blame Moira. As a lover he had, perhaps, satisfied her for a time, but that time was long past, and love itself had grown stale. As a husband he had always been a failure. If she should be unfaithful, if she should leave him, he would accept what happened with dignity and resignation. There would be no scene.

So Neil smoked and dreamed. The clock in the living-room—a wedding present from the Pine Creek community—struck eleven. Moira and George would be home soon. He went into the bedroom and looked down at Ian asleep in his cot. The night was very warm and the child had only a thin cotton sheet over him. And, looking at his son, Neil felt a sudden pang of remorse. What chance had a poor little devil like Ian, growing up in a world which was hard and pitiless towards all except those who were themselves hard and pitiless?

He went to bed and fell into a sound sleep. He was awakened by Ian's crying. He got out of bed hastily, lit the lamp and hurried to the crib. Ian was half-awake, his face working convulsively. "There, there, old boy," Neil soothed him. "Everything's all right. Daddy's here."

The child, still in the grip of a nightmare, cried out hysterically, then gradually became calmer. "Like a drink, Ian?" Neil asked.

"Aw'right, Daddy," Ian sniffed.

Neil brought a drink from the kitchen. "Now then, settle down. No more crying," he commanded. Ian turned over and closed his eyes. Neil waited until the child's breathing was regular, then he returned to his bed. But before blowing out the light he looked at the alarm clock on the bureau. It was past one o'clock.

He got back into bed but did not sleep. Instead, he lay on his back staring up into the blackness above him, revolving in his mind what might have happened. Perhaps George and Moira had met friends, and were lingering over a cup of coffee in the Chinese restaurant; perhaps they had run out of gas, or had had a breakdown of some kind. But deep inside him he knew that none of these things had happened. And now that he was face

to face with the reality which he had dreaded, he no longer wanted to be civilized. Now, for the first time, it came home to him with stunning impact that he was in danger of losing Moira for good, that he had, in fact, already lost her. And he wanted to kill George Meeker. For the only time in his life he knew how Cliff Martell had felt the night that his wife had waltzed with Charlie Steele at the Pine Creek dance.

At last he heard the car drive into the yard. He did not know what time it was—past three, anyway. He heard the kitchen door open and Moira moving about quietly. The car roared away into the night. Presently Moira came into the bedroom and got in beside him. He lay with his face buried in the pillow, pretending to be asleep. Moira spoke very softly. "Neil?"

He did not answer. Her hand touched his shoulder lightly, but he made no movement. Then Moira turned away and presently he could tell from her breathing that she was asleep.

In the morning, he told himself, there would be a showdown. If she loved Meeker he would not stand in her way. He would go and Meeker could take his place. He thought of the woman lying so quietly beside him as she had looked when he had first seen her, her face laughing, radiant, young, her hair shining in the lamplight; he thought of the little boy sleeping securely in his crib, and for a moment he felt that he could not carry through his resolution. But only for a moment. Uncertainty was worse than pain; and the postponement of the reckoning meant only suffering ten times intensified.

At breakfast Moira talked a good deal. Neil thought that he detected a kind of hectic excitement in her voice. He himself was silent, gloomy. Once or twice he tried to force himself to speak but the words would not come. In the light of day his resolution had evaporated. After breakfast he went to the barn, milked the cow and returned to the house with the half-pail of milk. Moira was in the bedroom, combing her hair. He went in to her. "Moira," he began.

She turned, smiling. "Yes, dear?"

"Moira." His voice sounded harsh and unnatural. "I've got to speak to you—"

"Neil, listen!"

Ian had turned on the radio. A voice spoke from the living-room: "Germany invaded Poland at dawn this morning—"

Moirá's face went deathly white. "That means we'll be in it?"

"That means we'll be in it."

She looked at Neil, startled. There was a ring in his voice and he was smiling.

"You sound almost glad," she said.

He laughed, and kissed her lightly. "Glad? Why should I be?"

She picked up her brush. "What was it you wanted to speak to me about?"

"Nothing, darling," he said. "Nothing at all. Only to tell you how pretty you look."

BOOK FOUR

Music at the Close

Chapter One

DURING the next few days Neil and Moira carefully avoided any discussion of the future. Instead, they both talked a great deal about things that were of no importance and were unnaturally polite to each other. Then one afternoon Neil changed into his best suit and packed a few articles in a bag. "I'm going to Edmonton tonight," he said. "Thought I'd make some inquiries about enlisting. Don't suppose they'll want me, but I can see what the set-up is. Johnny's going, too. He'll drive me. He'll be around any minute now."

At first Moira did not say anything. Then she pushed back a lock of hair from her forehead and smiled at him. "I knew you'd be going soon," she said.

That was all. As soon as Neil heard Johnny's horn outside he caught up his bag. "So long," he said. "See you in a couple of days." They kissed each other good-bye. Moira's lips were cool and firm.

"Good luck," she said. She stood in the doorway, smiling, while he got into the car. At the gate Neil turned and waved to her. She waved back, then suddenly closed the door. Neil felt vaguely unhappy. He wondered why she did not wait until they were out of sight.

But when he came home on his first leave, things were like they had been in the old days. Moira greeted him without restraint, and little Ian was wild with excitement and happiness. Neil had brought him a drum, and after supper they all paraded around the living-room, Ian in the lead, until Neil and Moira were almost exhausted. Afterwards, when Ian was in bed, they talked and planned until very late. They would rent the farm, Neil said, and Moira and Ian would move to the city and live in rooms so as to be near him. "It'll be a grand change for you, darling," he said. "Think of seeing the bright lights



again after all these years! And we'll have a lot more cash to come and go on than we've ever had before. There'll be something from the crop—then there's my pay and your allowances. Why, we're practically rich!"

Moira smiled at him in the old way, but the light died quickly in her eyes. She reached over and patted his hand. "It will be nice, Neil," she said. "Nice to be with you."

He felt a lump rise in his throat. "Shouldn't be surprised if the fighting never really gets started," he mumbled. "People are talking about a phony war. Maybe there'll be peace in the spring."

"Maybe. And if there is, we'll come back to the farm?"

Neil experienced a momentary feeling of panic. He shook his head quickly. "Let's not talk about it now," he said. "Everything's so uncertain. We'll know better where we stand in a month or two." And he took her in his arms and when she tried to speak stopped her words with his lips.

During the rest of his leave they did not again discuss the future. Neil had a dread of looking far ahead, and for once Moira seemed content to live from day to day. And when Neil had a chance to rent the farm on half-shares she offered no objection. Neil was overjoyed to snatch at the opportunity; he was in a fever until the papers were actually signed. Now, whether or not the war ended in the spring, they had burned their bridges, and the life that had grown intolerable was behind them. What lay ahead Neil neither knew nor cared. He refused to consider the consequences of an early discharge from the forces.

He slipped quickly and easily into the routine of army life. It was pleasant to have no responsibilities beyond mechanical obedience to orders. He enjoyed, too, his occasional short leaves in the city, which he spent prowling about the streets by himself, revelling in the freedom which only solitude can give. The army intruded upon his privacy; he did not mind greatly, but he had always relished being alone.

He kept a copious note-book during the first few weeks of his new life. When the war was over he would again try his hand at writing. His experiences, both physical and spiritual, would surely provide him with the material for a great work. But as

time passed, the entries grew fewer and shorter. There was, after all, little to record about a life that was almost wholly routine. And as always, he was slow to make friends. Even in the army he made only casual acquaintances, nor did he seek anything more. For a time he was almost intimate with a Jewish boy named Viner, a slim, dark, passionate youth with a vein of poetry in him, who when drunk liked to declaim Verlaine and Baudelaire and who had fantastic adventures with street-walkers. But Viner was invalided out at Christmas, and Neil found no one else who really interested him. His fellow-soldiers liked him well enough and let him alone.

He was a good soldier. He obeyed orders promptly and intelligently because it saved trouble. He was quick to learn, always respectful of authority. But he was not good prospective officer material; he lacked initiative. He would have enjoyed wearing an officer's uniform and sharing officers' privileges, but it was easier, pleasanter on the whole to drift along in the ranks with no responsibilities whatever. Later, when the casualties started piling up, promotion would probably be hard to avoid. But until then he was content to enjoy the almost complete relaxation which his present existence permitted.

He did not share the restlessness of his companions. He could not understand their constant clamour to be sent overseas. He was quite content to stay where he was. It would be pleasant to move about Canada for a bit, but he had no wish to cross submarine-infested waters in an uncomfortable troop-ship for the sake of a little excitement and possibly six feet of earth at the other side. He assured himself that if the time came he would go uncomplainingly and in good heart, but he had no wish to hasten that time's approach. He lived in a kind of contented lethargy, sure that his wife and child were provided for, and with little concern for the future.

Moira and Ian were living in Edmonton now, in two rooms. Moira was doing part-time teaching in one of the city schools, leaving Ian at a day nursery during teaching hours. She was looking well—better, in fact, than Neil had ever seen her. She was smartly dressed and well groomed and Neil was proud to introduce her to his acquaintances. And once, when he saw a lieutenant-colonel looking at her with a hot gleam in his eyes,

he experienced an emotion that was a curious mixture of indignation and genuine pride.

And insensibly, as time went on and it became clear that the war would last indefinitely, Moira seemed to slip into something of Neil's own attitude of mind. The present was secure and comfortable; the future so uncertain that there was no use worrying about it. For years Moira had seemed strained and tense; now suddenly she relaxed. Almost miraculously the passion of the early months of marriage was revived and intensified. Neil, confident now of Moira's love, satiated with its bitter-sweet ecstasies, was happier than he had ever been.

In the spring of 1942 Johnny Watson's eldest son, young Harry, was killed over Hamburg. Johnny, now a sergeant in the Veterans' Guard, told Neil. "Kind of hard," he said. "He was just eighteen. First time over. Bright kid, too—always done well at school and was figgerin' on goin' to college when he come back."

He stopped and looked away. "And then," he continued, with a visible effort, "I get to figgerin'. Mebbe he isn't so bad off, after all. Life ain't been so hot for those of us who come back from the last one." And he walked away very quietly. It seemed strange to talk to Johnny without hearing his high-pitched, echoing laugh.

In August of that same year George Meeker was killed on the beaches of Dieppe. Moira cried a little when the news came through. Neil felt no bitterness. What had happened between Moira and George did not matter any more; for George was dead and in a little while even his memory would be shrouded in the darkness that now enveloped his dust.

Three days later Neil went on embarkation leave. Moira heard the news calmly. "So you're going to have your adventure, after all," she said.

"Looks that way." Neil experienced a painful recurrence of the strange sinking feeling about the pit of his stomach that had bothered him ever since he had known that he was to go soon. "But I suppose they'll keep us in England until it's over. We'll probably replace the native home guard."

Moira smiled again, but did not say anything more. The next morning, for the first time in many months, they went to

church together. The Anglican cathedral was just around the corner from where Moira lived, and they went there because it was convenient and they did not have much time. Neil liked the Anglican service. The words of the Prayer Book never failed to thrill him, and the sermon was short and did not matter. This morning, the collect for peace took on new significance: "O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom: Defend us Thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in Thy defence, may not fear the power of our adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord." And for the moment the fear left him, the fear that seemed always to be gnawing at his heart, the fear that never gave him rest. It was comforting to sit with eyes half-closed and think of the great prayers of mankind. Best of all he liked the *Nunc Dimittis* of the Evensong—"Lord, now lettest Thy servant depart in peace—" with its promise of a fair dismissal. And there was the benediction that he had heard over the air not long before—"O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, O Lord, in Thy mercy, grant us safe lodging, a holy rest and peace at the last—"

It was restful to sit in the church, to watch the light filtering through the stained-glass windows, to feel the throb of the organ vibrating pleasantly in the ear-drums, and to repeat, inwardly, the words with which man sought to reach the ear of his God. The world seemed far off, and Neil was glad to shut it out.

This morning the Dean preached the sermon. The Dean was a big man, impressive in surplice and stole. His voice matched his appearance. It was deep, resonant, yet capable of delicate shadings. He preached from the text, "Greater love hath no man," and his words were a ringing affirmation of faith in the cause for which men were dying all over the world. To many in the congregation—the fearful—the sorrowing—his words brought a consciousness of hope and lofty purpose in a world which for so long had appeared only menacing and full of evil. When the cause is great, said the Dean, sacrifice becomes privilege.

And the names of leaders who had died on behalf of mankind and had thereby taken on immortality rang through the aisles of the church like the notes of a great trumpet—David Livingstone, Abraham Lincoln, Charles Gordon, Edith Cavell, Fogarty Fegan of the *Jervis Bay*. . . . And for all those, said the Dean, illustrious or obscure, who were still to die in the fight for freedom, there should be no tears, no mourning:

They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old,
Age shall not weary them nor the years condemn;
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them. . . .

When they came out of church the sky was overcast and a fine rain was beginning to fall. "I knew I shouldn't have worn my new hat!" Moira wailed; and they ran all the way home, laughing like children. They did not say anything about the Dean's sermon. But Neil knew that Moira, like himself, was comforted. The haunted look which he had seen in her eyes the past few days was gone. Neil felt elated, almost like one who has had a vision.

They went into the house and on upstairs to Moira's rooms. Ian, who had been playing outside under supervision of the landlady's daughter until driven in by the rain, was sitting quietly in a corner of the living-room. "Hello, darling," Moira cried gaily. "What on earth's the matter?"

Ian lifted a woebegone face. In his hand he clutched what was left of a little tin soldier, the sole survivor of a set that Neil had sent home months before. The paint was gone, the face battered out of all semblance of human shape. The scars of old battles covered him from head to foot. And now both arms were shattered and one leg dangled uselessly, attached to the body by the merest thread of tin. "He's all busted, Mummy," said Ian, struggling hard to control his quivering lips. "He came runnin' right at me and I let him have it. I guess I was too close. He just all fell apart."

"But never mind, darling," said Moira gently, as she knelt down beside the boy. "Tomorrow we'll go to Woolworth's and get some more—a whole new set!"

"But I liked him, Mummy," said Ian.

Moira slipped her arm about her son's shoulders and drew him

to her with sudden intensity. Then she rose to her feet, carefully shook out the folds of her dress and without speaking went into the bedroom. Neil remained in the living-room. He picked Ian up and held him on his knee. "Everything will be all right, old chap," he said. "We'll get you a lot of new toys tomorrow."

The bedroom door was partly open; he could not see Moira, but he could see her reflection in the dresser mirror. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, her face buried in her hands. And he knew that she was trying to recall what the Dean had said that morning and could remember nothing but the words—"they shall grow not old."

But when, two days later, they said good-bye, Moira was strangely self-possessed. She did not go all the way to the station, but walked with him across the park towards the corner where he would catch a street car. It was early morning and there was no one about. When they came in sight of the car tracks she stopped.

"Good-bye, Neil," she said.

She stood there, tall and slim in the morning sunlight. He kissed her, almost awkwardly. "Good-bye, Moira."

Then she laid her hands on his shoulders and looked at him as if she were trying to find something in his face that was not there.

"Remember, Neil. Never be afraid."

Chapter Two

BUT HE WAS AFRAID NOW. Afraid as he had never been in his life before. He stood peering out into the enveloping darkness, and not even the presence of hundreds of companions all around him could destroy the sense of isolation, the feeling of fear in the face of the unknown. On every side men were talking in low voices, so that a steady hum rose above the distant throb of the engines and the slap of water against the ship's bow. Someone, it sounded like a boy, laughed once—a high-pitched, hysterical laugh. A voice spoke harshly, and there was no more laughter. The man at Neil's shoulder spoke. His voice was a little too shrill to be natural. "Won't be long now, I figger."

Neil did not answer. He found a small space by a cabin wall and sat down, back to the wall, knees drawn up. Somehow the hollowness in his stomach seemed less that way. He wanted food, something to fill the void, but he knew that if he ate he would probably be sick. But as he sat there in the darkness, almost alone, it seemed, his tense nerves gradually quietened. It was soothing, somehow, to concentrate on what had happened during the past two years, to recall what he had seen and the people whom he had met. England had been almost as wonderful as his boyish imagination had once pictured it—the England of green fields and orchard-lawns, of rolling hills and lowering crags, of desolate heaths and moors where he had always felt at home. The vast sweep of Dartmoor from High Tor, of Romney Marsh from the uplands above Hythe and Dymchurch-under-the-Wall—these were the scenes that had filled him with a poignant longing for the great rolling sweep of prairie that was his home. And Scotland, land of his fathers! There was a country a man could never forget. Neil was a Fraser. For generations his people had lived and loved and

grown old and died among the heather-clad hills of the lowland. There Neil was at home. There he met people whom he had understood—craggy farmers, men of few words, readers of books, living close to the harshness, the cruelty, the unique grandeur of the earth that nourished them. The Englishman was a stranger to the end. Even in the pubs of London where, if ever, the native relaxed, there was always a barrier between the outlander and the man who offered him a drink—a barrier which not even the ever-present menace of imminent extinction could break down. The Scots were different. They judged a man on his merits. There was in them none of the instinctive condescension towards foreigners which was characteristic of every class of Englishman. But England itself! London, grey with years, battered, burning, deathless. One sensed in London as nowhere else the pulse of a people, rooted for centuries in their island home—cold, incomprehensible, but great: Unmistakably so. Dying now, perhaps, but still great. —

A nation, an Empire, dying. And with the Empire, her people. Dying around the world, in Africa, in Burma, the Pacific, the cold sea-routes of the north. And for what? Neil wondered. He recalled the words of a poem which he had learned long ago—not Rupert Brooke this time—but someone whose name he had forgotten:

Happy is England now as never yet.
And though the sorrows of the slow days fret
Her faithfullest children, grief itself is proud.
Even the warm beauty of this spring and summer
That turns to bitterness turns then to gladness
Since for this England the beloved ones died.

Whate'er was dear before is dearer now.
There's not a bird singing upon his bough
But sings the sweeter in our English ears:
There's not a nobleness of heart, hand, brain
But shines the purer; happiest is England now
In those that fight, and watch with pride and tears.

He said the words over and over again to himself, and for a time almost forgot the fear that haunted him. But at last the hypnotism of sound ceased to cast its spell; and the words were themselves meaningless. He could not deceive himself: it was

for no such high sentiments that Englishmen were dying today; for no such love of country that he himself and thousands upon thousands like him had died or were about to die. He thought of young Harry Watson, crashing into the holocaust of Hamburg; of Doug. Thatcher, killed somewhere in North Africa; of Porky Williams, drowned long ago at sea; of George Meeker, dead on the beaches of Dieppe. They had gone to war because there was nothing else for them to do. In a world that was drab, oppressive, hopeless, war and war alone had something worth while to offer—security, excitement, release from the deadly routine of marginal existence. For Neil himself it had offered a way of escape from difficulties that had been threatening to destroy him.

But now, looking back over past years, he was seized with an overwhelming desire to live—a desire so strong that for the moment he felt a desperate urge to strike out wildly against the forces that were herding him inexorably, impersonally, towards extinction. He thought of Moira as he had seen her last, Moira who now epitomized all that was strange and thrilling and romantic in life. He thought with anguish of his young son Ian, straight as a poplar, clear-eyed, beautiful. There was so much that Neil could do for him, so many things that he could teach him—how to make a whistle out of a willow when the sap was running in the spring, how to make a bow and arrow, how to pitch curves—sweeping out-curves and back-breaking drops. In fancy, he saw himself and Ian on the university campus, heard himself saying with just a trace of whimsical wistfulness in his voice to the tall handsome youth at his side: "I was here myself, you know, Ian. A long time ago. Things were different then. I didn't have quite the same chance as you. But it means more to me, Ian, that you get your degree than a B.A. could ever have meant to me." Perhaps Ian might even win a Rhodes Scholarship. All Rhodes Scholars weren't like Gerald Taverner. Neil had visited Oxford fleetingly. The afternoon had been foggy, cold. But the sight of Magdalen Tower rising through the mist, of the stately dome of the Bodleian and the magnificent curve of the High Street had awakened in him strange and poignant longings. He could wish his son no better destiny than three years in the shadow of those grey old

towers. Life could indeed be rich and beautiful for Ian—for Moira—for himself. And in the face of its possible termination Neil's heart was filled with a wild, unreasoning anger.

And yet, when the moment came, it was not so bad. They went ashore at dawn under a flaming sky that swarmed with planes. And when they reached the beach and a bullet kicked up the sand at Neil's feet he did not flinch. For of a sudden he saw again the vision that had come to him once before in childhood—of men spread out in a thin wavering line, advancing across what had then seemed to be a plain but was now no more than a narrow strip of beach, towards the high cliffs beyond. It was as if here on the Normandy beaches some plan of life decreed from his birth was reaching fulfilment. So Neil, his rifle gripped hard in his hands, went forward over the sliding sand and thanked God he was not afraid. . . .

Night came on and darkness rolled down over the earth. Neil lay sprawled on his back in a green field beside a shattered tank near a hedgerow. He had not moved for hours—not since the shell had come out of nowhere and gone off a few yards away. Or so it seemed. Perhaps he had dreamt it all. He felt no pain anywhere, only a burning thirst and a great weariness. He could not move his arms or legs but his mind was clear. He was glad of that. There were things he wanted to think about. Only, thinking tired him so much. Perhaps it would be better to lie quietly on the ground and look at the stars. He had never lain on his back and looked at the stars before, and he would never have another chance. He knew that. They would find him in the morning, perhaps, but now the noise of battle had rolled past on either side and far away. It did not matter very much whether they found him or not. But he would have liked a drink.

Better this way, all things considered. He had always liked being alone. People around him would have made him nervous, unhappy. But he wished that Moira could have been with him, just for a minute. Long enough to take his hand and see that he was not afraid. She had not trusted him in the last hour. She had known him too well. He felt a thrill of pride in proving her wrong. Even though she would never know.

She would never know. Nor would Ian. But at least he

would believe that his father had died well, for Moira would tell him so. And Neil was glad. For now it seemed to matter more than anything else in the world that Ian should be proud of him. And in a flash of illumination Neil knew that this could never be if he lived, that the vision of the future which he had conjured up while on the boat was false, like every dream he had ever had. For after the war life would take up again where it had left off. The sun and the earth would be unchanged; the society which they nurtured, if changed at all, only imperceptibly. His place in the scheme of things would be as it had always been. He would return to the farm and hover once more on the edge of failure, through the long, dreary years that held no joy and no hope. The old bitterness, the old irritations would be revived. And inevitably, as the years crept on, the rift between Moira and himself would widen. But there would never be a clean break and they would go on living with each other, sunk in hopeless apathy or hating each other. And in the eyes of his son he would dwindle and shrink to be even less than an ordinary mortal. No more a hero, a god as he now was, but something less than common clay. Better by far that things should be as they now were, that he should close his eyes for good remembering Moira as he had last seen her, tall and slim and beautiful in the morning sunshine with a smile on her lips that was for him and no other man, remembering her words, "never be afraid," and knowing that he had survived the last great crisis of life.

Gil Reardon—George Meeker. Strange how little they mattered now. He had won Moira's affection—not love, perhaps, in the grand romantic sense—but all that any man had a right to hope for. And now he would hold it. Perhaps she would marry again. Better if she should. But she would remember him always and her memories would be kind. And somewhere about the house would be a photograph of him in uniform, sergeant's stripes showing clearly on his arm. Something for Ian to look at and be proud of all his life. He was glad about the stripes. Not as good as being an officer, of course, but something to set him apart, if only a little way, from the common run.

He closed his eyes, for he was very tired. Strange that in the last hour of his life he could be so completely free from fear.

Strange, too, that there should be no bitterness. Strangest of all, that he could think more clearly, see more clearly than in life. And now, reviewing with curious deliberation the years that had gone like a half-forgotten dream, he knew that his life had not been wholly wasted. He remembered what he had thought when he had shuffled along in the parade of ragged, embittered miners on the day that Gil Reardon had died—that he was witnessing one infinitesimal manifestation of man's instinct to fight in order to be free. Now he was in the very centre of the struggle in its most awe-inspiring form. Because he died, and thousands and millions like him, man would not at once be unchained. But he and his fellows had made a contribution, however blindly, however unwillingly, to a struggle that might last a thousand years. Nothing that he had done in his life before this day had any meaning. His death was the only justification for his having lived at all.

And what was true of himself was true of those who died with him. Most men lived and died and left not even a memory of their having ever been. The world was no richer or poorer or better or worse because for a little while they had trod the earth and gone their way. History was made by the few. But occasionally the masses of mankind, stirred by forces they did not understand, impelled by emotions over which they had no control, threw their weight into the never-ending struggle and humanity moved one step nearer the fulfilment of an age-old dream. Strange that in the irrational, fantastic society of earth, war and war alone could justify the existence of countless millions who in peace were of no importance, not even to themselves.

And, in the end, he had less to complain about than most men. He had seen much, and felt great emotions. And now in his last hour he could look forward to the things that the poets of mankind held out as the fairest rewards of earthly endeavour. A holy rest . . . peace everlasting . . . music at the close.

He slept then, until the pain wakened him. It lasted only a little while. When it had subsided he lay and looked at the stars through eyes that were strangely blurred. He did not want to think any more, only to rest. But noises bothered him—the roar of planes high overhead, the rumble of big guns far away.

The invasion was going well, but he wanted to sleep. And the noises would not let him.

Then the pain came on again—a wild beast that tore at his entrails—so bad this time that his lips parted in a thin, high-pitched scream. But the pain stopped after a while, and the stars faded and the darkness lay over the land, not transparent now but like a heavy shroud. The sound of the guns continued a little while longer, but faint, no more than a barely perceptible muttering, a vibration to be felt rather than a sound to be heard. Then silence, absolute, unbroken. And darkness that enveloped the universe.

THE END

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